



**The
Strange
Adventures
of
JOHN
SMITH**



**WILLIAM
HENRY
HUDSON**

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THE STRANGE ADVENTURES OF
JOHN SMITH



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OF
JOHN SMITH

BY
WILLIAM HENRY HUDSON

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To
MY WIFE



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THE STRANGE ADVENTURES OF JOHN SMITH

CHAPTER I

IN WHICH JOHN SMITH DISCUSSES HIS MANIFEST DESTINY

LIFE might have been in many ways a very different thing with him, he was profoundly convinced, if only his name had not been John Smith.

John Smith! Who gave him that name? Not his god-fathers and god-mother, certainly, for his family did not belong to the Church of England as by law established; but his own father and mother—which only made matters worse. They, at least, ought to have realised—they were Smiths themselves—the enormity of their blunder. It was practically like sending their child out into the world with a paternal curse. The “Smith” of it they could not help, of course; that was their misfortune, not their fault, though wiser people have been known before this to change the inherited form into

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Smythe. But then, John! They had the whole dictionary of Christian, and, strictly speaking, of heathen names, too, to choose from; and they might surely have selected one, or perhaps two—poor John was not wildly ambitious; he did not aspire to the voluminous appellations of royalty—by the strength and virtue of which the commonplace cognomen itself might have been lifted above the dead level of insignificance and vulgarity. And yet—it was vain to question why—they had actually fastened upon John.

John Smith! the whole thing was at once tragic and absurd.

"If only I had been a girl, I might have married, and changed Smith into something else," the much troubled young man remarked plaintively to his bosom friend, Ben Chadwick.

"If you had been a girl, you might have been Smith, but you certainly wouldn't have been John," said Ben sententiously, taking his pipe from one side of his mouth, and placing it carefully in at the other.

John appeared to be considerably impressed by the argument. He smoked for a few minutes in silence, gazing vacuously out of the window, without, however, seeing anything; which was indeed just as well, for the small, dismal houses across the narrow suburban street were not beautiful to look at.

"Unless it were in France," he suggested presently, "where, you know, they get male and female names so oddly mixed up together. I've read of French chaps whose names were Mary."

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"In France you would hardly have been Smith, and if you had been, Smith would be a deucedly uncommon name," said the logical Ben.

There was a pause, during which both young men puffed away industriously, and in the fading light of the early autumn evening the stuffy little room grew blue with tobacco smoke.

"Well, I daresay you may be right, Ben," said John at length, in his non-committal way. "Still, I put the whole thing into a nut-shell. It's like this, you see. How can you expect a fellow to turn out to be anything whose name is John Smith? Could John Smith ever make a fortune? or become a general in the army? or a great poet? or a philosopher? or—or—even a member of Parliament, or a famous lawyer?" John did not intend to be sarcastic. "Ask yourself the question, Ben. Did you ever hear of John Smith falling heir to a vast fortune? or rescuing a girl from drowning, and afterwards marrying her? or getting implicated in strange mysteries, and fighting duels with unknown men before daybreak? or—why, the very idea is ridiculous! Now, isn't it?"

They were discussing the subject for, probably, the nine hundred and ninety-ninth time, for it was one that had been a burden grievous to be borne on John's mind for many years, and seldom gave him peace. But Ben Chadwick was a man of infinite patience, if somewhat slight responsiveness. It was nothing to him that he knew his companion's troubles of heart. He had his pipe, and the only easy-chair in the room rolled close to the only

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window, and he was completely comfortable. And being comfortable, he was willing enough to listen sympathetically, and occasionally to bestir himself sufficiently to say something to the point.

"What in the world do you want to turn out to be anything for?" he now asked, developing, as was usual with him, a theory of existence marked by a genial optimism which, in turn, was bred of easy digestion, perfect health, and a conscience which, like his body's machinery, had never yet given him a moment's twinge. "Isn't life all right enough as it is? You don't know when you're well off, John. I hate a man to grumble in that stupid way. It isn't—well, I don't call it"—with a sudden dash—"I don't call it religious. There! It must be an awful nuisance to be a great general, for instance; no end of responsibility, and that kind of thing. And I don't see what fun there would be in philosophy, and mysteries, and duels; and all poets are mad, you know, and unhappy, and die young."

Mr. Chadwick offered this interesting generalisation with the easy confidence of a man who knows well what he is talking about. It will be seen that he was a person of low ideals and coarse views of life. In fact, he was a Philistine.

"Now, put it to yourself in this way," he went on argumentatively, though not quite so effectively, perhaps, as was desirable, for he did not trouble himself to remove the pipe from his mouth while he talked, "what is the object of life?" Here Mr. Chadwick impinged, without knowing it, upon a question much canvassed in philosophy, and thus

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far, it is to be feared, with no very satisfactory results. "I take it that the object of life is to get all the fun out of things that we can. Very well, then," the speaker continued, in a tone of fine self-complacency, as though this were a statement from which there could be no possible appeal, "and how can we get the most fun out of things? Why, by just taking them easy, and enjoying them as they come, don't you know. What's the use of ambition? I'll undertake to say"—here he removed the pipe for a moment, and waved it rather impressively in the air, thus adding much weight to his sentiment—"I'll undertake to say that nine-tenths of the trouble and worry in life are due to ambition—the women being responsible for the remainder; and a pretty big remainder it is, too—more than all the rest put together, sometimes."

It would probably be vain to seek the logical bearings of this dark utterance. We can only assume that Mr. Chadwick spoke under the stress of some unpleasant reflections; and, given such conditions, precision of statement is hardly to be expected.

"At any rate, here you are, John." Observing that his friend paused on this assertion, John nodded in acknowledgment of the fact that there indeed he was. "Well, can't you enjoy yourself, and be content? You've got a good billet in the city; hours easy; decent pay; Saturday afternoons free; everything, in short, a fellow can possibly want. You can smoke your pipe; go to the theatre; have your Sunday up the river, at Richmond or

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'Enley; take a fortnight's holiday in the summer at Margate or Clacton, or where the deuce you please. And what"—here Mr. Chadwick became really earnest—"what do you mean by grumbling about poets, and philosophers, and members of Parliament? Can a poet enjoy his brandy-and-soda any more than you do? Not he! And as for members of Parliament and lawyers—good gracious, they have a thousand times more to think about than you or I! Then why the dickens do you everlastingly make such a fuss? Can't you see you're much better off as you are? Great heavens, John"—Mr. Chadwick could restrain his indignation no longer—"sometimes you make me sick."

He knocked the ashes quite fiercely from his pipe, and filled it again from the open tobacco-box on the floor by his chair. Ben's feelings were not easily wrought upon, for he was of the phlegmatic humour. But naturally, John's visionary extravagances were occasionally unbearably exasperating to a young man of such a healthily-balanced and eminently practical mind.

"I'm afraid you don't quite understand me, Ben," John remonstrated mildly.

"No, I don't—that's pat," was Ben's blunt retort. He was busily engaged in lighting his pipe, and in the now dark room the flare of the match threw into clear relief his round, fresh-coloured, pleasant, unintelligent face, short fat nose, and close-cropped sandy hair. Mr. Chadwick was not endowed with the fatal gift of beauty.

"You say I ought to be contented," John continued.

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"Well, I can't be contented. Life for me is a dull, flat routine. I have cravings—"

"Indigestion," Ben interjected, with a snort.

"For change, stir, romance."

"Romance! Horrors! is the man crazy?"

When the conversation took this turn, Ben always became seriously alarmed.

"Why is my existence so prosaic? Why don't things happen to me? I know well enough—my name is John Smith."

The poor fellow, be it remarked, had never even heard of the elder Mr. Shandy's ingenious speculations concerning the subtle influence over men's characters and destinies exerted by the *praenomina* they are forced to bear with them through life. But he was in profound, though quite unconscious, agreement with that astute philosopher, being in the position of many disciples who often do not so much as know the name of the great master to whose school they nevertheless belong.

"Supposing my name had been Clarence, now, or FitzHugh, or Lancelot, or Bertram, or—"

"Or Jemima," Ben interposed, with biting sarcasm.

"Supposing it had been FitzHugh Vespasian Smith, for example"—John scorned to take notice of his friend's rude suggestion—"well, I think I might have been or done something romantic then. Fitz-Hugh Vespasian Smith," he rolled the sonorous syllables over his tongue with the air of a connoisseur. "Yes, there might have been some chance for poetry in a fellow's life with a name like that. Things might have happened to me—who knows?"

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Don't you see for yourself, Ben, what a difference it would have made?"

"Well, John, I can't truthfully say that your logic's very clear or convincing to me just at present," Ben admitted. "The whole business seems a little airy and—and that kind of thing; and what the dickens a man wants with romance, and why he should make himself unhappy because things don't happen to him, I confess I don't quite understand. Still, after all, it's your affair, and not mine, thank goodness; and if you insist upon romance, and fancy that all the trouble lies in your name, I see but one way out of the difficulty—change it! If FitzHugh Thingumbob will save you, why, for Heaven's sake, call yourself FitzHugh Thingumbob, and have done with it. Who's to prevent? See a lawyer. He'll settle the matter legally for you in double quick time, if you don't mind paying the fees."

But John dejectedly shook his head.

"It wouldn't be the same thing, Ben; it wouldn't be the same thing at all," he said gloomily. "You know I'm really John Smith, and where would be the slightest use in my calling myself anything else. Would it make any difference to a cat if you chose to call it a dog?" John laughed a bitter little laugh. "Would it run up to you, and wag its tail, and lick your hand, and run for sticks, and swim? Not a bit of it! It's a cat, call it what you please. It's a cat, and there's an end of the matter. And I'm John Smith, and there's an end of the matter, too. My destiny is settled, and I can't help myself."

"Well, my boy, I can't argue the question with

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you," said Ben, as he rose to go. To tell the truth, Mr. Chadwick's intellect was not of the metaphysical order, and John's scholastic realism bewildered him. "But keep your pecker up, all the same. I don't know, and I don't care, anything about romance myself. But, hang it all, it may not be quite as bad as you think. Things may happen to you yet—plenty of 'em. Give me a match. I never knew such tobacco as this for going out. Why don't you try a new brand? Thanks. Good-night!"

CHAPTER II

IN WHICH JOHN SMITH DETERMINES TO PLAY A TRICK ON FATE, AND SEE WHAT COMES OF IT

LET us hasten to say that John Smith's trouble, strange as it may seem, was a very real one to him. It lay like a dull load upon his life. One would never have guessed from his mild, watery blue eyes, his pallid face, his weak mouth and chin, and his thin light-brown hair, always carefully parted in the middle, and plastered down on both sides across a low but rather protruding forehead, that the young man had any mental history to speak of; still less that it was a mental history of ceaseless stress and strain. Yet such was indeed the case. John Smith had cravings which were not to be referred, as Mr. Chadwick rudely suggested, to dyspepsia. He was—though he did not himself phrase it in this neat, philosophic fashion; in other words, he missed the delicate happiness of finding a high-sounding formula for his conditions—he was in constant friction with his surroundings. He was miserable because he felt that Fate had dealt harshly with him; and for the time being he saw no way of escape.

The source of all his difficulty may be indicated in a very few words. He was a young man of romantic

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temper, born into an environment of the most dismally stupid and prosaic kind. He was another instance, he often thought—his knowledge of mythology, or perhaps of Longfellow, extended thus far—of Pegasus getting into the Pound ; though the liberation whereof the poet wrote seemed, so far as he was concerned, to be very remote indeed. With visions and hints of an order of things very different from his own, he found himself condemned to a routine of daily drudgery against which his whole nature rose in revolt. He cherished his dreams, while he struggled blindly and hopelessly with the realities of existence ; and the sharp contrast between matters of fancy and matters of fact kept him in a state of perpetual fume and ferment.

Not that John Smith was an idealist, or a poet in embryo, or a Utopian of any sort or school. The tragedy of his inner life worked itself out on a much lower plane. He nourished himself on no lofty speculations ; he followed no transcendental counsels of perfection. He never read philosophy ; never went through any spiritual crisis ; never cared for poetry, except once in a while, perhaps, for a few things of the Byronic order. His visions were simply visions of romance—of “moving accidents by flood and field,” strange adventures, hair-breadth escapes, midnight murders in muddy marshes, fair ladies in distress, villains of the regulation stamp, schemers, mysterious fortunes, and dark deeds generally. The world which sent its faint whispers to him as he plodded on in his own dull, uneventful life was the great world of fiction and melodrama—

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the world of the novelist and the playwright. And because the visions and the realities held themselves so severely apart—because his own domain of everyday fact seemed to have no point of contact with that large dreamland of splendid possibilities where existence was highly interesting and things constantly happened, John Smith felt himself to be a deeply aggrieved and disappointed man. That was all; but for his happiness and peace of mind it was more than enough.

Just how a man of these romantic proclivities managed to get himself born into the family of a middle-class Cockney dissenter—surely the most hopelessly unromantic of environments—we must leave it to the evolutionists to explain. Like wise men, we will accept the fact, and not trouble ourselves about the theory. In such surroundings, at any rate, John Smith made his appearance in this overpopulated world. James Smith, his father, who kept a little grocery shop in one of the most grim and uninviting streets in one of the most grim and uninviting suburbs of the great metropolis, and who, in his capacity of local preacher, frequently delivered lengthy harangues in fervently ungrammatical English at the Primitive Methodist Bethel just round the corner, died when his offspring had as yet given no signs of a growing dissatisfaction with the world in which his lot had been cast, beyond a tendency—not altogether unusual, we believe—to demand things that he ought not to have, and cry when he did not get them. Left a widow with this one child, Mrs. Smith presently

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moved to another suburban district, and began to take in lodgers. For some unknown reason, she actually thrived. In this way she had been able to carry out the plan of her heart, which was to give her son something of an education.

So John went to school; and there the discord of his life commenced. Spelling, arithmetic, book-keeping—Mr. Speedwell's Academy was statedly commercial in its scheme and purpose—history, geography, grammar, and the smattering of Latin which was thrown in by way of gentlemanly ornamentation: to those things he straightway developed a profound antagonism. Meanwhile, he began to devour greedily all the novels that came within his reach. Over the works of Marryat and Harrison Ainsworth, Dumas *père* and James Grant, G. P. R. James and Charles Lever, he spent many an hour which ought to have been given to problems in the rule of three, or the mysteries of single and double entry; and in proportion as his mental appetite for this kind of stimulating food increased, did he come more and more to appreciate the flat, stale, and unprofitable character of the uses of his own little world. We say nothing here of the painfully unromantic scenes between master and pupil to which this condition of things presently gave rise—scenes in which poor John played no very heroic part; for Mr. Speedwell belonged to the older order of disciplinarians. For him the theory of single and double entry was one of the sanctities of life; and he had a short and easy way with dissenters from the faith. It is more to the point to remark that in

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this manner John Smith was unwittingly laying the foundations of the misery and dissatisfaction of his later years. He dwelt upon the doings of Midshipman Easy and Jack Sheppard, of the Count of Monte Cristo and Dick Rodney, of Henry Masterton and Charles O'Malley, until these people became flesh-and-blood realities for him, haunting his dreams by night, and following him through his waking hours, in the playground and at the desk. And thus as time went on, the fatal rift in his life widened gradually into a yawning chasm. On the one side lay the beautiful land of romance, rich with strange adventures and wonderful experiences ; on the other side, the grim, dismal, uninteresting country of the actual, the prosaic, the commonplace. Then the question began to buzz like a fly in his brain : Why had he been born to such a sordid and humdrum destiny ? why was he not also a Dick Turpin or a D'Artagnan ? Things happened to them, and life was clearly worth living. To him, John Smith, the son of James Smith, a Primitive Methodist grocer, nothing had ever happened—nothing would ever happen !

Had he been of stronger and more virile make, he might, in this period of youthful greensickness, have taken his destiny into his own hands, as many another restless lad has done, by running away to sea, or emigrating to California, where, according to Mr. Bret Harte, things have been known to happen to a good many people. But John Smith was not, except in his dreams, cast in the heroic mould ; and so he got into the habit of grumbling with his fate without

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making the slightest decisive effort to mend or change it. And thus the period of youth passed by, and the greensickness remained, because he had given himself no chance to throw it off, as healthier boys generally do.

At seventeen, John's school-days came to a close, and he entered upon the brilliant career of shorthand writer in the office of a firm of flourishing shipping merchants in the city. To sit perched on a high stool, in a gloomy upper room, engaged from nine to six in transcribing notes and copying strangely-worded documents—such was now his fate. People told him he was lucky to get such a position. He did not think himself lucky at all. He was not a bad young fellow; for all his weakness and absurdities. He realised that his mother had done much for him, and was willing enough to help her to the best of his ability now that his turn had come round. He was even delighted when he saw her able to give up the lodging-house, and enjoy a small but private house of her own. But it was terribly hard work for him, none the less. The school had been bad; the office was, if anything, worse—duller, more stupid, more hopelessly practical and commonplace. Nor, as the years went by, did poor John make the smallest attempt to rise above his circumstances, or push forward in the direction of better things. He had no strength of character, no vigour or determination, no special ability, and, so far as business went, no ambition. The stories sometimes told of great city magnates who, beginning life as errand boys or copying clerks, had mounted the commercial ladder

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rung by rung, and had become at length millionaires, aldermen, members of Parliament, made little appeal to his sluggish mind. He felt in a vague, dim way that it would be pleasant to be rich and influential, and he often talked about business success and the power it gives men. But such matters took no real hold upon him. His weak nature, still fed on highly-seasoned fiction, and rejecting all solid food, continued to crave morbidly for excitements which, in his daily routine, were certainly not to be looked for ; and because to him, as to hundreds of thousands of other young men similarly situated, nothing more surprising happened than an occasional break-down in an omnibus, or a bilious attack brought about by over-indulgence in beef-steak pie and beer, he insisted on being miserable, and on regarding himself as one of the failures of the world.

Such was, broadly presented, the spiritual history of John Smith down to the time when he had well passed his thirty-second year. It was about this period that he had that conversation with Mr. Benjamin Chadwick which has been duly reported in our earlier pages. This particular dialogue was, as we have said, but a sample of many such. Chadwick was John's friend and only confidant, and the unfortunate fellow was accustomed to pour his grief, with much earnestness and persistency, into that excellent young man's sympathetic ear. It necessarily happened, therefore, that the two, smoking their postprandial pipes, traversed the same ground over and over again, meeting the same experiences by the way, and coming out, evening after evening,

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and month after month, with pretty much the same entirely unsatisfactory results. John, apparently, found some solace in thus discussing his woeful situation with the only living creature to whom he had ever opened his heart; while Ben, as we have seen, was, after his own bourgeois and undemonstrative fashion, a true and well-meaning friend, and, provided the physical conditions were fairly good, exhibited extraordinary patience under circumstances which, we are forced to admit, must sometimes have been desperately trying. The net consequence of all these numerous and lengthy interviews, however, must, from any practical point of view, be set down as nil.

But it happened on this particular night that something Ben had let drop in the course of their conversation fixed itself in John's mind, and would give him no rest. Left alone, he did not, though it was already late, at once prepare for bed. He filled his pipe once more, and sat down in the chair Ben had vacated by the open window, watching the great autumn moon as it rose above the roofs of the houses opposite, and flooded the deserted street with its strange, weird light. Even when at last he turned in for the night, it was not to sleep. A new idea had taken possession of him, and he tossed from side to side on his hot pillow till well on towards the dawn.

To explain what this new idea was, and why it came to trouble John so sorely, we must go back a little, and pick up a dropped thread.

Had he been questioned about the matter, he

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could not, for the life of him, have settled on any exact date, but it was somewhere about the time when he left school, and the dazzling prospects of a commercial career first opened up before him, that he had conceived a sudden and intense aversion to the name with which he found himself afflicted—John Smith! The indescribable horrors of such a ridiculous combination of cacophonous monosyllables had burst upon him like a flash of inspiration. Instantly, his mind seized upon the newly-realised fact as if it had been a great psychological discovery, and the circumstances of his life were thrust for him into an entirely fresh light. Straightway he began to dwell on the matter after his foolish, moody habit, until little by little it came to be a fixed idea with him that in the thrice confounded John Smith were to be sought the source and origin of all his woes. Thus the cup of his sorrows was filled to the very brim. At thirty-two he regarded the entire question as definitely settled, and his destiny as partaking of something of the character of cosmic law, from which no deviation was possible.

Now, the new thought that Ben Chadwick had just started had direct connection with this same problem of the name. Ben's suggestion was a simple one: if John revolted against the curt and vulgar handle which his benighted parents had nailed upon him, why should he not himself change it for something more to his taste? John, as we have seen, had scouted the idea. Philosophically considered, it had seemed to him trivial and superficial, having no relation with the hard

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realities of his existence—a childish trick, say, to hoodwink Fate, and as such, clearly foredoomed to failure. And yet, left to himself, he began to feel, as he pondered upon it, that the hint, hastily thrown out and just as hastily rejected, was not so wildly extravagant, after all. What harm could there be, at any rate, in trying the experiment? Might it not perchance offer, at least, a partial way of escape? Who could tell? It is true that, in all his confused speculations on the subject, he had always treated the “John Smith” as actually part and parcel of his identity—like his nose or his foot; it is true, likewise, that even now he made no pretence at being convinced that by altering “John” into anything else he might choose he would get a whit nearer the essence of his being than, for instance, by playing that his eyes were deep black, while all the time he knew they would remain of their feeble, washed-out blue. Such matters obviously belonged to Destiny; as he had told Ben, John Smith he was, and John Smith he would continue to be to the end of the chapter. Still, once again, why should he not make the trial? For desperate conditions, desperate remedies are proverbially necessary. Success *might* follow the venture—he caught his breath as he thought of the possibility, remote though he felt it to be; and even if it failed—well, then he would only be still just where he had been all along. Nothing would be lost; something might be gained. Yes, the scheme was worth putting to the test; and to the test, without hesitation or delay, John Smith, wide awake on his pillow, determined

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to put it. Here he noted that the clock in the sitting-room beneath struck three. He fell asleep at last, and might have slept till mid-day, but for his mother's sharp rapping at the door. As it was, he was a full half-hour late. He scrambled through his toilet, omitting the formality of shaving, not, however, without a rueful glance at his chin; swallowed a cup of coffee and a few mouthfuls of sausage; had a fierce run for the omnibus, and a tussle to get a place; and finally discovered himself, hardly more than half-awake, outside the office door.

And yet, notwithstanding this unpropitious beginning of a new day's work, John was conscious of a certain vague feeling of exaltation. It seemed to him that in some mysterious way a fresh chapter was about to open for him, tentatively, FitzHugh Vespasian Smith. He mounted his high stool with quite unwonted energy, and answered the morning greetings—gruff and laconic, or cheery and expansive, as the case might be—of his fellow-clerks with a freshness of voice and manner that might have surprised them, had they been given to observation. At intervals during the day he amused himself by scribbling his newly-assumed name on scraps of paper, which he immediately tore into the minutest pieces; and when he went out to lunch, he gave himself a jaunty appearance by tipping his well-worn hat just a tiny trifle to one side. FitzHugh Vespasian Smith! He felt there was some chance for him now. Things might happen.

Now, it is no part of our purpose here to enter

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into any speculations on the intricate questions of human life and destiny. We will confine ourselves to a plain, unvarnished statement of fact, leaving theories and explanations to the philosophic inquirer, to whom they come as grist to the mill. And the plain, unvarnished fact of the matter is, that something forthwith did happen to John, *alias*, FitzHugh Vespasian Smith. Year by year, as child, boy, youth, man, he had bemoaned his uneventful, prosaic existence. Now he was suddenly to find himself what he had never expected to become—the hero of a genuine romance.

And this is the way in which it all came about.

CHAPTER III

AN ADVENTURE ON THE UNDERGROUND RAILWAY

JOHN SMITH—it will be more convenient for us to continue to call him by his vulgar name—did not go straight home from the office when the day's work was over. He was engaged for a little convivial evening with a few chosen spirits at the home of one of his city friends, Mr. Robert Simpson, who was understood to hold quite a confidential position with the well-known law-firm of Nockerborn, Gurney, & Nockerborn. This Simpson was a man of high repute in certain circles by reason of his unimpeachable cigars, his ready, if somewhat boisterous, wit, and his extensive repertoire of comic songs; and was, indeed, regarded by those whom he condescended to include in the list of his intimates as a veritable glass of fashion and mould of form. An evening at Simpson's was accepted as meaning generous potations, late hours, and—for John, at any rate—a good deal of yawning and a failure of appetite for solid food on the following day. But, after all, how can you be really sure that you enjoyed yourself overnight if you do not feel a trifle the worse for it afterwards? So John took

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a chop by way of dinner, and had a satisfactory interview with the barber; and at eight o'clock sharp knocked rather more vigorously than usual at Mr. Simpson's door. It was close on midnight when he hurried away, leaving the party in full swing; and then he had all he could do to catch the last train that would serve his purpose on the "Metropolitan."

It was a generally expressed sentiment among those who remained for just one more cigar, and the proper accompaniment, that that was the drawback of London. Everyone had to live such a deuced distance from everyone else, to the manifest disadvantage of social gatherings and the intercourse of friends, who otherwise would not think of going home till morning, when daylight doth begin.

Meanwhile, John had actually caught his train with something less than ten seconds to spare, and was now the sole occupant of a dirty, badly-lighted third-class compartment, which he had selected because it was one of the small, closed kind, and therefore at that late hour rendered him tolerably secure against intrusion. Lack of his customary rest the night before, and the excitement of the present evening's joviality, had proved in combination to be rather more than he could stand. He was desperately tired and sleepy, and having a considerable distance to travel, wisely determined to make himself as comfortable as possible under the circumstances. To this end he ensconced himself in the further corner, with his back towards the engine, placed his feet on the opposite seat, folded his arms, rammed his hat

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well down over his eyes, and with a deep-drawn sigh settled himself to dose.

Of course, he had the usual difficulties to contend with. The train seemed to take a fiendish delight in rolling and jolting with a violence altogether out of proportion to the progress made, and in indulging in wild sudden stops and rebounds, which brought his head with a dull thud into collision with the upholstered back of the compartment. Every jar of the carriage played havoc with his hat, and his hat unreasonably avenged itself upon his nose. For the first few minutes, too, he would start up with an excited snort at every station, under the firm impression that he had reached his journey's end, and was in instant peril of being swept beyond his destination. Obviously, all this was inimical to peaceful slumbers, and John may surely be forgiven if his muttered criticisms on the malice of things in general were of the kind best left unreported. But by-and-by he grew partially inured to the rattle and the shaking, the abrupt stoppages and lurching departures, the banging of doors at the successive stations, and the hoarse, unintelligible cries of the porters, and sank down into a heavy sleep. . . .

Bump! Plunge! He could account for it afterwards only by supposing that in his somnolent condition he had been nodding himself more and more out of the perpendicular, and that the infernal train, taking advantage of his general limpness, had given an unusually vigorous lunge, with the design of throwing him head foremost out of his seat. At any rate, he awoke with a jerk which seemed to wrench

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every bone in his body, caught himself up in the act of diving off somewhere into space, made a mad dash at his hat as it bounded from his knees with the elasticity of a tennis ball, and, looking round with a stupid stare, was horrified to realise that he was no longer alone in the compartment.

John was wide awake in a moment, and at once began to gather himself up into such semblance of dignity as he was able to assume under circumstances which would have sorely tested a greater aplomb than his. Good heavens! what had happened during those past minutes of unconsciousness? Had he—it was frightful to think of—had he actually been snoring? He could have sworn that his mouth had been half-open. What sounds might—nay, must—have issued thence!

Out of the corners of his eyes he glanced sheepishly across at the further corner of the carriage, feeling that he had never before been caught at such a terrible disadvantage. But the girl sat perfectly still and quiet, to all appearance entirely unaware of his existence, and absorbed in gazing out of the window into the thick, sulphurous darkness of the tunnel.

Though by no means satisfied, and still very hot and embarrassed, John felt just a trifle relieved. He arranged his tie and pulled down his waistcoat, and began to solace himself with the reflection that, amid the incessant noise of the train, the snoring might not have been so very audible, after all. Then he ventured to look across at his companion again—this time a little more boldly.

The girl was certainly pretty; yes, very pretty,

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indeed. Though her face was turned well away from him, so that he could catch only the soft line of her cheek, he saw enough to convince him of that. Her luxuriant brown hair clustered carelessly under a most coquettish little hat, tipped, he noticed, somewhat to one side of her head ; she was dressed in a way which, to his masculine eye, was faultless in its ensemble, though he would never have been able to describe the details by the subtle blending of which the general effect had been produced ; the figure and pose were, he thought, by all odds the most dainty and graceful he had ever seen. Her tightly-gloved hands lay folded in her lap, and the tiny pointed tip of a diminutive shoe peeped coyly from beneath her skirt. Here, of a surety, was one of his own heroines of romance in flesh and blood before him ! Once having taken all this in, himself unobserved, he continued, spellbound and bewildered, to allow his gaze to rest upon her, till he became so absorbed in the charm of the picture she presented that he forgot all about himself and his own discomfiture. He longed for her to turn, even for a moment, from the window, that he might get a full view of her face, which he was absolutely certain beforehand would be beautiful—radiantly beautiful. But the train rumbled and rattled along on its clumsy way ; and still he watched her with rapt intentness, and still, placid and unmoved, she kept her head averted from him.

The revelation came at last, and came so suddenly that the few stray wits poor John had left about him were scattered in the instant.

They had just pulled up in a station, and there

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was at once a wild confusion of slamming doors and vociferous shoutings from a couple of porters who rushed along the platform bawling prolix directions about doing something or the other, or leaving it undone at one's peril, in a tongue no man uninitiated into their mysteries could hope to understand. All this scuffle and tumult was nothing to John, but, as it were, the faint murmur of the real world breaking in upon a dream which he vaguely felt he must struggle to hold intact just as long as possible. But the snapping of the spell came in a moment from within the dream itself. Transfixed by the sudden flash of a pair of large, luminous grey eyes turned easily and frankly upon his own, and by the dimpling of a smile which seemed as childishly innocent as it was fascinatingly beautiful, the rapt young man started to find himself addressed in accents which gained in sweetness by reason of a slight, piquant suggestion of foreign quality to be detected, as he fancied, in them.

"I beg your pardon, but could you tell me if this is Portland Road?"

"Portland Road!" exclaimed John, with the air of a man who now heard the name for the first time in his life. "No, no, this isn't Portland Road—certainly not. I—I don't quite know what station it is," he added, without in the least realising what he was saying, and peering through the smoke at the jumble of advertisements which lined the opposite platform, for the confusion of anxious passengers; "but," with decision, "I am sure it isn't Portland Road."

"Oh, that's all right, then," said the girl, with

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another smile, which seemed to John to fill the dark, dirty compartment with a flood of light. "One doesn't want to be carried quite out of one's way at this time of night, you know," she went on, in easy tones of explanation ; "and all the stations seem so much alike, and I'm pretty much of a stranger in this part of the world, anyway. I suppose this train *does* go to Portland Road ? I was told so by the conductor, or guard, or whatever you call him."

"Oh yes, it goes to Portland Road right enough," said John, who was gradually regaining control of his wits. "You want to get out there, do you ?"

"Most certainly I do !"

"Well, then, don't worry." John cleared his throat loudly, and took a sudden leap. "I'll see that you don't miss the station. I—I'm going to get out there myself."

Oh, John ! John ! what in the world would your good father, the Primitive Methodist local preacher, have said to a plump lie like that ? Portland Road, indeed ! when you know that you are bound for Hammersmith, and that this is the last train that will take you there to-night ! No wonder you flush red to the roots of your hair when you meet the steady, yet quizzical, gaze of your new companion's lustrous grey eyes.

John, of course, could never afterwards give any reasonable account to himself of his extraordinary announcement. The words were out of his mouth before he knew what he was about, or had time to realise the rashness of the move he was making. All he could possibly say concerning the matter, when he

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came afterwards to think it over and over, and to turn it in his astonishment this way and that, was that he was spellbound, bewildered, carried completely out of himself. Chance had thrown him, in the most unexpected fashion, into the society of a strange young woman, who had questioned him earnestly, as one puzzled passenger has surely a right to question another, about her route; and within three minutes, under the fascination of her presence, he had, in his own mind, already practically constituted himself her knight-attendant; and as a first step to whatever might come of it, had mendaciously asserted her destination to be also his, notwithstanding that he would be deposited in consequence miles out of his proper way. Was it not rash, thoughtless, crazy? Or rather, was it not a thousand times worse than this? Here was a young girl, smartly dressed, talkative, singularly unembarrassed in her behaviour, travelling by herself in a third-class compartment on the underground railway after midnight. She must have entered the carriage of which he had been in sole possession purposely, one might suppose, choosing this from the score of unoccupied ones at her disposal. Looked at in calm blood, it all appeared very suspicious, and John, had he been wise, might very well have argued with himself that in offering her any counsel or assistance, certainly in putting himself to any inconvenience to help her, he would run serious risk of having, at the best, only his trouble for his pains. But he was in no mood to lend ear to the whispers of wisdom. Sermons and soda-water are proverbially known to belong to the day after.

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He did not stop to reason with himself, or even in his excitement to give a second thought to the plain facts of his situation. Touched by a magic, the like of which, in power and subtlety, he had never felt, never so much as dreamed of before, the infatuated young man capitulated entirely, and without a struggle.

After all, even when the time came for sermons and soda-water, though he might look back on his erratic and apparently unaccountable conduct with ever-growing surprise, he could not find it in his heart to pass harsh judgment upon himself for recklessness or stupidity. There was something about the girl which distinguished her sharply from the common adventuress. Her dress, it is true, betrayed a fondness for high colour, and somewhat fantastic, if not exactly hazardous effects. But John felt instinctively, uncritical though he was in such matters, as a rule, that it was neither fast nor vulgar, but admirably conceived, and in perfectly good taste. Whatever one might say of individual touches here and there—and it is hardly to the point to remark that John himself would not have had a detail altered—her whole appearance was at once dainty and neat; her style and bearing had the mysterious but unmistakable *cachet* of the lady; while, the moment she spoke, her clear, delicate enunciation and low-pitched, musical voice carried conviction of breeding and culture. Her very ease and frankness of bearing were beyond exception; so far from giving the slightest hint of coarseness or careless freedom, they seemed only the unchecked expression of a candid and simple nature—a nature wholly innocent of guile.

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All these considerations, however, had, it is almost needless to say, absolutely nothing to do with John's line of action at the moment. They formed a large part of his self-defence in many a later hour, when his adventure, viewed in retrospect, had come to seem more like a dream than a reality, and when he marvelled greatly how he had been led to conduct himself as he had done. For the time being, a spell was upon him, which he did not even wish to break. Without breathing-space for question or doubt, and perfectly willing to let things take their own course, be the issue what it might, he was deaf to reason and blind to consequences, and, of course, extremely happy.

"Ah, thank you—now I feel safe!" said the girl lightly, as though John's veiled offer of service and escort was the most natural thing in the world. The words themselves, and the tone in which they were uttered, gave no suggestion of surprise; but was there, or was there not—the young man was never able to satisfy himself about this, though he put the question a hundred times—a certain mischievous look about the eyes? "This underground is a terrible invention, isn't it?—ugh! Do you Londoners ever get used to these awful fumes, I wonder? Why don't you build an elevated railroad, like they have in New York? It isn't pretty, of course, and I daresay it's awkward to have the train running just outside one's bedroom window. But then, after all, fresh air is something—don't you think so? Do you know"—John was too much infatuated to notice particularly the way in which she rattled on without

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waiting for any reply to her queries—"do you know," and she laughed in the merriest and most musical way, "I was really very much afraid that you were going to miss your own station, you seemed to be so fast asleep."

John felt himself turn crimson again, remembering the half-open mouth. Yes; there appeared to be no question about it—the girl's laugh settled the matter—he *had* snored.

"I—I really don't think I was actually asleep," he stammered, in his confusion. "I think I may have—I hardly know, but I think I may have just closed my eyes, perhaps. I was awfully tired; it's getting late—and I—I—the motion of the train, you know—"

He broke down abruptly in his attempted explanation, for his companion was shaking her pretty head in a way that left no possible doubt as to what she thought of its value.

"Well, well," she said, "and why in the world should not you close your eyes if you wanted to? No apology is necessary to me, I am sure, for with your eyes closed, you couldn't know of my existence, could you? And this is a free country, I'm told, where everyone may do as he likes. Come over here, and sit by me. We may as well be friends for the few minutes we are together, mayn't we?—and I hate to shout against all the noise and jolting of the train. That's better! Nobody will interrupt us; they'll avoid our carriage, thinking we're a pair of devoted young lovers, I suppose—regular 'Arry and 'Arriet style, eh? Isn't that fun?" The girl laughed

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again, and John was really surprised to find that he did not feel a bit embarrassed or uncomfortable, save perhaps for a certain haunting recollection of the snoring. "And now then, 'Arry—I may call you 'Arry to keep up the joke, mayn't I? It's just as well to get all the fun one can out of things, don't you think so?—and now then, 'Arry, how did you come to be out by yourself at this time of night? Do you know that it's past twelve o'clock?"

This was too good!

"I'd rather like to know how *you* come to be out by yourself at this time of night," said John boldly.

Yes, John actually said this—the ordinarily shy and reticent John.

Once more his enigmatical little companion laughed gaily, and her laughter bubbled up in light ripples, and was very pleasant to listen to. She did not seem to take the question amiss, or to treat it at all seriously. Would she ever treat anything seriously, John wondered, this bright and dainty maiden, so curiously out of place in her present surroundings, and so bewildering in her perfect frankness and composure?

"I? Oh, I'm all right! I can take care of myself very well, thank you. And I thought it was always considered extremely impolite to answer one question by asking another, especially where a lady's concerned." She pouted with mock gravity, and John could not help noticing that her face, suddenly grave and almost severe, had all the mobility of an actress's. "Come, sir," she continued, "I'm not going to let you off. What are you doing on the underground

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railroad at midnight, eh? You ought to be at home and in bed."

John had no genius for chaff, and unlike most men of his age and station, knew too little of certain classes of society to be able to take his part in light banter and meaningless repartee. It was his habit to regard everything solemnly—and in particular, everything that, however remotely, concerned himself. Moreover, the present situation was for him one in which any kind of badinage would have been ill-timed and impertinent. He concluded afterwards, what any other young fellow would have seen at once, that the girl had, in reality, no kind of interest in him or his movements—that in all probability she was only obeying the dictates of a spontaneous and effervescent nature in carelessly keeping up a sort of nonsensical give-and-take conversation with a travelling companion whom chance had thrown in her way, and whom there was not the slightest probability of her ever meeting again. But this view of the matter did not dawn upon him at the moment, and he answered with laborious precision and earnestness.

"I've been out spending the evening with some friends of mine. They live a long way off. All one's friends live a long way off in London. London's a big place—altogether too big, I think."

"Oh, I don't know about that," said the girl, with a little toss of her head; "I guess that depends on taste and—and other things." John felt that she now really meant what she said, and was piqued with the notion that there must be some inner significance in her words. "I, for one, like a big place—a place

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where one can be swallowed in the crowd, and where no one knows or cares anything about you."

The low, musical tones had a ring of genuine emotion, and the grey eyes had grown almost hard. But there was no keeping pace with this strange, volatile creature. In another instant she had gone back to her reckless jesting.

"Friends, eh? Well, I daresay you had a good time. You men always do when you're alone. Women are always in the way, though you're too gallant to own it—sometimes, at least."

"But I assure you—"

"Yes, there you are! Never mind. I'll forgive you. I daresay I should have been the same if I'd had the misfortune to be born a man. I hope you didn't drink too much. That's wicked, you know. I smell you of tobacco-smoke."

"Well, all the other fellows were smoking—"

"Naturally—all the other fellows always do, I believe. You needn't care, anyway, as long as your wife doesn't mind."

"My wife!" exclaimed John, in horror. "Why, I'm not married!"

"Oh, come now—"

"'Pon my honour, I'm not." John looked at the girl with such pleading solemnity that she broke into a laugh.

"Well, don't be angry. You—you look like a married man. Oh, I don't know why exactly, but you do. There's a sort of air about you—I can't define it! Feminine instinct—wrong for once, eh? Besides, I thought all Englishmen settled down by

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the time they got to be thirty years of age. I've always heard so much of the domestic hearth, and that sort of thing. You really disillusion me dreadfully. You ought by your time of life to be a regular prosy *père de famille*, with half-a-dozen children to take to church with you on Sunday. How can you dare to fly in the face of Providence in this disgraceful way?"

"It's all very well for you to make fun of—of these things," said John, a trifle ruefully. "I—I wish you wouldn't." He might dream vain dreams of stirring incident and adventure, and stimulate his fancy with romance; but, after all, he could not entirely throw off the influences of the great British Middle-class Tradition into which he had been born, and for which, as he was quick to observe, his companion had but scant respect. "I—I—well, I don't see why a man shouldn't get married, and—and take his children to church, or chapel, for that matter. Don't laugh. I'm quite sure that I—that you—I mean, that if—I suppose," exclaimed John, making a sudden dash out of his confusion, "that you are not English yourself!"

"Don't I speak English like a native?" asked the girl gaily.

John had no time to reply to her question, for the train lumbered into a station, and stopped with a jerk.

"This is Portland Road," he said.

Though his brain was in a whirl, he felt perfectly ready for whatever might happen next. So he held out his hand, and helped the girl to alight.

CHAPTER IV

THE END OF JOHN'S ADVENTURE ON THE UNDERGROUND RAILWAY

WHEN they reached the top of the station stairway and turned into the Euston Road, the girl faced round and held out her hand.

"Good-night, and good-bye!" she said. "Thank you for all your kindness!"

"I don't see why it should be good-night!" said John boldly. "It's awfully late for you to be out alone; which way are you going?"

"I won't tell you. It's awfully late for you, too. It would be a shame to trespass on your good-nature any longer. Come—good-bye!"

"Which way are you going?" John insisted.

He had never spoken in such a manner before. He was no more the mild John Smith, whom Ben Chadwick was wont to counsel, and whom Simpson loved to chaff. He was quite dictatorial and peremptory.

"Well, then, if you must know, I have to go as far as Great Coram Street."

"Capital!" exclaimed John. "That's quite in my direction. I'm going to—to Russell Square."

John said this quite naturally, and met, without

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flinching, the sharp glance of the keen, sceptical grey eyes. It is wonderful what rapid progress may be made in the fine art of lying with a little practice, and if one only takes oneself steadily in hand. And after all, was he lying? You *can* get from Portland Road Station to Hammersmith by way of Russell Square, as one can get from London to Paris by way of the Cape of Good Hope. Only, it is not exactly the shortest cut.

"Will you walk, or shall I call a hansom?" continued the reckless young man.

Having regard to his own statement of destination, he did not think it necessary to inform his companion that she had made a mistake in coming so far as Portland Road, and that her most convenient station would have been King's Cross or Gower Street.

"Thanks, I'll walk, certainly. It's not far, is it? and I've been riding in trains all day."

"Let me offer you my arm, then."

A sudden but decided change had come over John since he left the railway compartment and stepped out into the fresh air. At first he had been simply staggered and bewildered; he had talked, listened, acted as in a strange, wild dream. Now he had wakened, not, however, to reality, but to romance. Vague memories of the novels over which he had pored from boyhood up swept through his brain. He recalled in an instant a dozen dramatic situations, and seemed, as it were, to gain inspiration and strength. This dainty creature at his side, with her little kid-gloved hand placed lightly on his arm, and her pretty delicate face half hidden for the moment beneath her

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coquettish hat—surely she belonged not to the prosaic, sordid life, against which he had so long vainly protested, but to the bright world of which he had caught fleeting glimpses in his visions—the world in which things happened. He felt himself on the threshold of a real adventure. Life might turn out to be worth living, after all. Let him but screw his courage to the sticking-point, and who could tell what might come to pass. Vast possibilities—possibilities undefined, it is true, but still vast and tempting—flashed upon his mind. Poor John! Little, indeed, did he dream of what would be the issue of that night's rash conduct. Little did he foresee into what tortuous paths his innocent feet were to be led. Had he been endowed for just one second with the faculty of anticipating the future, I think he would have drawn back in horror, bidding his companion a hasty farewell. But as he had no greater power of prescience than the rest of us, he went his way, stirred to energy and pluck by the girl's beauty and fascination, and by the thought that surely something unusual, something worth while, would certainly come from this unexpected interruption to the ordinary humdrum course of his daily affairs.

Though it was still early autumn, the night air was chilly, and a mist, through which the lamp-lights gleamed a sickly and ineffective yellow, hung over the long quiet street.

"Are you warm enough?" asked John, as they set out together. He noticed that she had only the lightest of summer wraps about her shoulders.

"Oh, amply, thank you! And isn't it a relief to

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be out of that terrible railroad, and in the fresh air again?" She threw her head back a little, breathing hard. "I suppose you're quite used to it? But I don't think I should ever get so, if I lived in London twenty years. It seems to poison me—bah!"

"I travel by it as little as ever I can," said John. "I go into the city and back every day by omnibus, unless it's very wet. This is about the worst part of the line, you know."

She ignored this piece of information.

"You're wiser than—than you've given me reason to believe you, then," she said, glancing up into his face.

"What d'you mean by that?"

"You'll understand to-morrow, if you don't now."

"But I want to understand now, and if—"

"Oh, no, you don't!" was the decisive reply. "It would spoil the fun altogether. There's always plenty of time for understanding anything. At any rate, a man can always wait to realise what a donkey he's been. There's never any hurry about that."

"Why do you think I've been a donkey?" asked John. He did not know whether the girl was in earnest; he more than half thought she was. He was, at all events—profoundly so.

"I didn't say you'd been a donkey."

"But you implied it—"

"My dear friend, I was only laying down a very interesting general proposition; and, of course—"

"Stuff and rubbish!" exclaimed John. "I'm not talking about general propositions. You as good as

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said that I had been a donkey. I want to know why?"

He spoke quite fiercely. The girl laughed. She seemed really delighted to have teased poor John into an excitement bordering upon positive anger.

"Do be quiet!" she said. "I shan't walk with you if you're going to make such a fuss. You have no right to cross-examine a lady. We are quite irresponsible, and may say what we please. Besides, we shall be taken for lovers having a quarrel, and I wouldn't tolerate anything so absurd."

Just at that moment they were passing a policeman on his beat, who was flashing the bright light of his bull's-eye upon the fastenings of the door and windows of one of the houses.

John gave an indifferent glance at the officer of the law, who scarcely turned to look at them, and then continued his slow, regular way up the street.

"I think you might answer a fair question," he said woefully.

"But I don't think it is a fair question—there! And I'm not going to answer it—there again! And it will answer itself soon enough; you see if it doesn't—there for the third time! Why, good gracious me! what nonsense we're talking! Let's change the subject. You haven't told me all about yourself yet, you know."

"And you haven't told me anything about *yourself*," said John doggedly. "I was asking you just before we got out of the train whether you were English, and you only replied by asking me in return whether you didn't speak like a native. You said

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yourself that that isn't the polite way of meeting a question. You do speak as well as any native I ever heard," continued John, with enthusiasm; "but I don't believe you're an Englishwoman, for all that."

"Well, there's no doubt about you're being an Englishman, and a Cockney at that," answered the girl. "Why do all you Londoners speak with such a twang?"

"Twang!" said John. "Why, it's only Americans who have a twang. I didn't know there was anything peculiar about the way we talk."

"There's British insularity for you!"

"I suppose you're an American yourself—"

"Where *did* you learn to jump at conclusions in such an extraordinary way? Your brain works with wonderful rapidity, doesn't it?"

"But you were talking in the train about the elevated railroad in New York; and you said 'conductor,' and 'guess,' and—"

"And you think I have a twang, do you?"

"Well, your accent seems to me just a little foreign—French or something. I don't know what—I'm not very well up in these things—"

"And because I have a French accent, you think I come from America, eh?" said the girl quizzically. "You're a splendid logician, certainly."

But John stuck to his purpose.

"I don't mind your chaff," he said. "Are you French, or American, or what?"

John remembered afterwards every detail of this conversation, going over it a hundred times; and he could not help thinking what a remarkably curious,

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abrupt, and unprofitable conversation it was, leading, as far as he was concerned, nowhither. It had quite evidently been the girl's purpose—though he had not specially observed this in his flurry at the time—to keep the interest entirely off herself. What, he was fain to ask himself, would two young people, situated as they had been, have naturally talked about? About all sorts of pleasant things, personal and impersonal, and mainly, no doubt, the former. It was easy enough to evolve an ideal conversation for them—a conversation in perfect harmony with what he delighted to describe as the romantic circumstances of their meeting and intercourse. He had offered, and she had cheerfully accepted, his escort. Surely this should have meant a little serious talk, bordering upon the sentimental, perhaps, but at any rate open and confidential. But instead of that, they had, as it seemed to him, spent most of their time in fencing; and he was conscious that he had not got the better of it in any of their trials of skill.

But how she might have parried his last point-blank question, had she been left to herself—by what renewed banter she might have thrown him again off his line of inquiry—John had no chance of discovering; for just then a strange thing happened, which forced their attention for the moment into quite a fresh channel.

John had a born Cockney's "extensive and peculiar" knowledge of London, and while they were talking, he had turned off sharply to the left, taking a by-street which he knew would lead them most directly to their destination. He did this, not because

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he was anxious to curtail their walk together by a single minute, for he would willingly have extended it indefinitely ; but because, with all his vapouring foolishness, he was at bottom a good young fellow, and having a vague feeling that he had become responsible for his companion's safe-conduct, and that some mother, or sister, or perhaps male relative, might be worrying about her, he concluded that it was his duty to see her home as quickly as possible. But this short cut of his had brought them into a neighbourhood of narrower, and darker, and more lonely streets, in which the unwary pedestrian might easily miss his way, and through which, at any rate, had he given a second thought to the matter, he might have hesitated to escort a lady. He had not given such second thought to it ; indeed, his mind was too full to find place for any consideration of the kind, and to him this present route seemed simply a thing of course. Nevertheless, he was a good deal startled when the girl stopped suddenly, as they turned a corner, and in a voice that rang with some new feeling, exclaimed :

"What do you think of that ?"

John, brought to an unexpected standstill, looked round in a dazed way. The pressure of the small hand upon his arm had tightened into a grip.

"What do I think of what ?" he asked blankly.

"Of *that*," replied the girl, pointing to the doorstep before which they had paused.

Gazing down in the direction indicated, John saw a small bundle of rags, which, on closer inspection, turned out to be a sleeping child. There was

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little light in the street, but enough to show a tiny face, prematurely old and worn, and pinched features which bore every mark of hunger and ill-usage.

"It's only a child," he said. To him, a Londoner, such sights were familiar enough. He was not naturally less sympathetic than most men of his age, but custom had dulled his sensibilities.

"Only a child!" cried the girl, turning fiercely upon him. "My God! how can you talk like that—how dare you talk like that!" She snatched her hand from his arm. "You call yourself a Christian, I suppose, eh? and you live in what you call a Christian country; and you read newspapers which tell you how great and rich you English people are, and you fancy that, under Heaven, there's no one like you. Bah! you make me sick. You're as bad as the rest of them. Who do you think put that child there to starve? You did, whatever your name is. And don't you know, or don't you ever care to know, that in this big, wealthy, gorgeous, pleasure-loving, hypocritical London there are hundreds of thousands of such children, born in misery, bred in misery, doomed to a life of hopeless misery; and that it's all your fault—your fault—your fault! Look at that child—look at her, I say! She's only a symbol—a mere unconscious symbol—of everything that is hideous, and bad, and revolting in the great social system that you help to foster—yes, you, with your lies and your conventions. Only a child, indeed! I say, how dare you talk like that?"

Poor John could only stand and stare in speechless

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amazement. Who could have foreseen such an explosion? And what a little spitfire the girl was! Only two minutes ago she had been walking at his side, full of pretty nonsense and whimsicality, a gay, volatile creature whom one never would have imagined capable of any deep or serious thought. And now she had burst upon him, her face darkened with sudden passion, and had accused him, in her flighty volubility, of all sorts of horrible things that had never before entered his mind. Was she mad? What, in the name of common sense, had this child to do with him?

"I—I don't see that there's anything to be done," he muttered.

His teeth were positively chattering.

"Of course, there's nothing to be done," answered the girl, in a hard voice. "At least, not now. There's lots to be done by-and-by, though—lots and lots! Oh, things won't last for ever as they are at present. Mark my words, you'll never forget that child—never—never! You'll think of her a thousand times, and you'll come, perhaps, to realise that she's a symbol. Did you never ask yourself what, at the very bottom of your soul, is your final judgment of a civilisation which makes such a thing possible—nay, rather inevitable? Not you! You're a fool, like most people. Perhaps you'll live to see your folly—who knows? The child's asleep. Let us leave her here. For once we'll act on your favourite maxim of 'Nothing to be done.' Come on!"

Decidedly, John thought, this girl must be a trifle crazy. What was she talking about? What did she

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mean with her symbols? And why had she called him a fool?

He did not offer her his arm again, but she took it as a matter of course, and for a few minutes they walked on in silence. Then she spoke.

"I know what you're thinking of me."

"Do you?" said John. He was so bewildered that there was nothing else that he could find to say. And if she knew what he was thinking of her, it was more at the moment than he did.

"Yes, perfectly well. You're thinking that I must have escaped from a lunatic asylum, or be on my way to one."

She turned her bright young face up to his, and John noticed that all the hardness and passion had gone from it.

"Well," he began, with much deliberation, "I was a little surprised, you know, and I couldn't quite understand—"

"Of course, you couldn't." She laughed in the old, thoughtless way. "No, I'm not a lunatic—at least, I don't fancy I am—yet. No one can quite tell. But I *am* a fool; there's no doubt about that—I am a fool."

"You called me that," John remarked.

"Did I? Well, I suppose you are. So am I. That satisfies you, doesn't it? Men and women are only species of the genus Fool. Don't look so glum. We're nearly there now, aren't we? and—what were we talking about before this stupid interruption? Never mind. You were going to tell me about yourself, weren't you?"

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"I don't think so."

"Oh, yes, you were." Manner, voice, expression had undergone another lightning-like change. The terrible Symbol seemed to have passed entirely out of her mind. She was quite her old self again.

"What do you want to know?" asked John stupidly. She might have recovered; but he had not done so.

"Everything, of course. To begin with—what's your name?"

John felt himself grow hot all over, and hesitated.

"Smith," he said thickly.

"Rather vague, isn't it?"

"Well, but—"

"Oh, I know you couldn't help it! It's one of the things over which one has no control. But isn't it Byron, or somebody, who said that a man might as well have no name at all as be called John Smith?"

"If Byron said that—"

"I'm not sure that *he* did; somebody said it, any way. What's your other name?"

John swallowed hard. Here was a crisis. What he might have answered a moment before, there is no telling; but after that fatal quotation from Byron, or some other cynic, the simple truth was out of the question. Besides, did he not now feel himself to be the hero of a romance, and should he go back upon the experiment to which, after much painful agitation, he had only last night committed himself?

"FitzHugh Vespasian," he replied, with fatal distinctness.

The next instant he wished with all his heart he

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had stuck to plain John, for a merry peal of laughter literally awoke the echoes of the slumbering street.

"Fitz—*what?*" exclaimed the girl. "Oh, do say it again!"

John said it again. He was hotter than ever.

"Why, I never in my life heard anything so funny. FitzHugh Ves—pas—ian Smith," making long pauses between the syllables. "Well, no one could ever forget *that*. How *did* you come by such a name?"

"How does anyone come by their name?" groaned the unfortunate John, with ungrammatical solemnity. He had done for himself now, and there was no getting out of it.

"But it sounds for all the world like a novel. It's too funny. Your father and mother must have been great novel readers."

It was John's turn to be amused now, though there was little heart in his mirth.

"I don't suppose my father and mother ever looked at a novel in their lives," he answered, "or ever had one in their possession."

"Then I give it up. What an awfully odd fellow you are, Mr. FitzHugh Vespasian Smith. Go on; tell me something about them."

Whereupon John, only too glad to change a subject which threatened to plunge him, with every fresh step, into deeper and deeper abysses of absurdity and wretchedness, proceeded to give some account of his home-life. He suppressed entirely all reference to his own struggle against the overwhelming odds of destiny, his strange dreams of romance, and his long

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cherished ambitions. But with much simplicity he spoke of his widowed mother, and of the quiet, uneventful routine of their daily existence.

His companion listened attentively, only once interrupting him to ask when they had removed from Hammersmith (to which place he had unwittingly alluded), to the neighbourhood of Russell Square. This question John was wise enough to feign not to hear; and it was not repeated.

It was very pleasant to be talking so freely about himself to this pretty and fascinating little creature, and to find in her so sympathetic a listener. It will be readily understood, therefore, that Great Coram Street came altogether too soon, and that it was with a shock that he found himself brought by the girl once more to a sudden standstill.

"Now, then, Mr. Smith, good-bye!"

"But I must see you right home," the young man protested.

"No, you must not come a step farther with me."

"Why not?"

"I cannot tell you why. You must take my word for it. Beyond which, if you are a gentleman—and I know you are, for you have behaved as one to-night—you will leave me here, and promise not to follow me and stare after me, or try in any way to find out where I go to. You promise?"

John was rueful and crestfallen. This seemed a very flat and unsatisfactory ending to his evening's wonderful adventure. But the girl spoke with great firmness, and he saw that she meant what she said.

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"Yes, I promise—on my honour as a gentleman!" assuming the heroic.

"Thank you. I know you will think it very curious; but it is my wish, and that's enough, isn't it?"

"I would do anything you might ask," said John fervently.

"Thanks again, and good-bye, then!"

"At least, it might be good-night instead of good-bye!"

"No, no; good-bye—and for ever!" said the girl, holding out her hand.

"Do you mean," said John, in mingled despair and amazement, "that I am never to see you again?"

"Of course, that is what I mean. That is my wish—my command—Mr. Smith. No, you mustn't ask why. If I could tell you I would; but I cannot do so."

"Your word is law to me," said John, now quite in the heroic mood, and striking an attitude which would have done credit to one of his own favourite gentlemen of the cap-and-sword. "But—but all the same, you know"—and here the heroic failed him suddenly, and he became the simple Cockney young man—"it seems deuced hard."

"It is for the best," answered his companion decisively. "Mr. Smith"—he had taken her hand now, and she allowed him to hold it, while she spoke very clearly and seriously—"Mr. Smith, will you allow me to say a word to you before you go? You have been extremely kind to me to-night—extremely kind and courteous. I want to tell you

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that I appreciate your conduct thoroughly. I know more of the world than you, perhaps, may suppose ; and I know, therefore, that you might have acted quite differently towards me. I—I shall not forget you ; your—your funny name”—John winced —“will remain in my mind whatever may happen to me, and wherever I may be. But do you think that you have been very wise? You know as well as I do that you have no business here in Russell Square, and that you are miles from Hammersmith, where you ought to have been safely in bed an hour ago. Ask yourself—haven’t you come on a wild-goose chase to-night? How did you know who and what I was ; how—”

“Oh, hang it all,” John burst out ; “I know you are as good as you are beautiful—”

“Stuff and rubbish, Mr. Smith. All that kind of thing belongs to the novels your father and mother didn’t read. Yes, yes, it’s well enough to be kind to a stranger ; but London’s a big place, as you said, and a wicked one, and you ought to be careful what you are about. You think I’m talking nonsense, I daresay. I’m not. You’re a good young man, and I like you, or I wouldn’t take the trouble to say what I’m saying now. You have your mother to care for, and your way to make, and your life is before you. You have absolutely no business with a girl like me. Don’t misunderstand me”—she looked into his face frankly, and without the slightest embarrassment—“I’m not a Marion or a Marguérite, or anything of that sort.” John did not follow her allusions, but none the less he understood what she meant perfectly

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well. "But all the same, I am what I am, and what you would never, never understand. Chance threw us into the way of one another this evening, and we've had a jolly time together, though I did tease you at first, I'm afraid, for I thought somehow that you were a little bit of an English milksop. Well, there the matter ends. Let's take what the gods have sent us, and be thankful. There'll be no bad taste in the mouth, no unpleasantness or disappointments, if we leave things just as they are. To go farther would bring us both nothing but misery. Go home, like a good boy"—her voice trembled a little, though she broke into a laugh—"be more careful in the future, and, above all, do your best to forget me."

John was too much staggered by this extraordinary speech to undertake any reply. All he could stammer out was :

"At least—for I shall never forget you—you might tell me your name."

"If you ever think of me, think of me as Victorine," answered the girl. "But it will be much better never to think of me at all. So—good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" said John huskily.

He pressed her hand, and was about to turn on his heel to go. But Fate would have it that his night's adventure was not to close quite so tamely. Suddenly, noiselessly, from somewhere out of the darkness, a tall, massive figure stepped up to them, and laid a large hand on Victorine's shoulder. John caught sight of the face by the faint light of the street lamp at the corner. It was a huge, rough-hewn, swarthy face, set with the keenest of black eyes, and half buried in

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shaggy eyebrows, rough hair, and a short, bristly, untidy red beard.

What this repulsive individual said to his companion, John could not even guess, for the tongue was entirely strange to him—it was not German or French, he knew, and it seemed full of rumbling gutturals; but he could tell from the man's surly manner, and the tones of his voice, that he was angry.

John's blood was up, and for a moment he stood alert, quite ready to interfere.

But Victorine answered the new-comer in his own language, gaily, and with one of her ripples of laughter, and then pointed to John.

"This gentleman," she said, dropping into English, "has been very kind to me to-night. He has been good enough to see me home, and I don't know what I should have done without him. I'm all right now, you see, Mr. Smith. I'm so much obliged to you for taking so much trouble. Good-bye!"

And she shook hands with him, as she might have done with any ordinary stranger.

The next moment John found himself alone in the street. What had just happened had happened so quickly that it seemed like a dream. At first, in his confusion and anxiety, he was on the point of following the ill-assorted pair; but he remembered his promise, and resisted the impulse. What, then, was to be done? Nothing. He lingered for a few seconds where they had left him; and then, dazed and excited, turned and went his way.

CHAPTER V

THE NEXT DAY

"YOU'RE not looking very well, John," said Mrs. Smith the following morning, when her son joined her at their simple breakfast-table. "Have you got a headache?"

"I'm all right, mother," replied John tartly, helping himself, but without enthusiasm, to a rasher of bacon. "I'm rather tired, that's all."

His appearance certainly belied his words, and justified the anxiety depicted on the maternal countenance. He was pale and haggard, and there were dark rims under his eyes. We have spoken of the unpleasant effects which the good cheer at Simpson's commonly had upon him. In the present case matters had been made ten times worse by the excitement of his subsequent adventures, his hurried return, well on in the small hours, in a hansom cab, and the feverish dreams which had haunted the broken snatches of sleep which, towards daybreak, he had at last succeeded in getting.

"You were very late, weren't you?" continued Mrs. Smith, handing him his cup of tea.

"Yes, rather," John answered, evading her eye. "I missed my train, and one thing and another, and

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had some difficulty in getting home. It's a long way, you know."

John had been careful to dismiss the cab at the corner of the street, and to effect his entrance with more than usual precaution. He always did his best not to disturb his mother when he happened to return after her early bed-time. His habit of closing the front door softly, and creeping on tiptoe up the stairs and past her room, had really grown out of his thoughtfulness for her. On the present occasion, however, he was conscious that selfish considerations had been in the ascendant.

As for Mrs. Smith herself, I do not suppose that she was altogether satisfied with her son's explanation, though no suspicions were aroused. She was simply sorry that he had been so late—she had heard the clock strike one before she fell asleep, and knew then that he had not yet come in; and she regretted to see his sallow cheeks, and to observe the effort it required for him to swallow a few mouthfuls of solid food. She was a kindly, weak, absolutely commonplace woman, with a long, expressionless face, faint blue eyes, and hair that was rapidly turning to rusty grey. She was entirely devoted to her son, and in her heart of hearts would have liked to have him sit at home every evening and read the newspaper, safely out of harm's way. But for years past she had held her peace, lacking the strength of character necessary to make a decided stand, and fully aware, indeed, that no interference on her part was called for. She knew well enough that John was not dissipated; he was, after all, rarely out at night; he

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always told her quite freely about his friends and his doings. Nor had she ever shared the notion of her husband, dead now many years, that because the young man sometimes smoked of an evening with his fellows, joined in the chorus of comic songs, and once in a while took a seat in the pit of a theatre, he was therefore on the downward road to perdition. But she silently harboured a feeling of dislike towards the great Mr. Simpson, whom John had once brought to the house, and who had behaved towards her in a facetious and slap-dash style which she, poor woman, could not understand ; and she had long been aware that Simpson's social gatherings were, to put it mildly, of a lively and vivacious character, and thoroughly unfitted her boy for the enjoyment of breakfast and the pursuit of business on the following day.

But while she held her own opinion about these and other matters, it was not her habit to criticise her son, or to pester him with questions ; nor did she do so on this particular morning. Finding that he was little disposed to talk about himself, she turned the conversation to other subjects, telling him of this and that occurrence in the unexciting annals of the street, and asking his judgment on the advisability of laying in an extra supply of coal before the prices went up for the winter. This important domestic question, which had to be discussed from many points of view, occupied them till the hand of the clock on the mantelshelf indicated John's hour of departure. And then Mrs. Smith kissed him good-bye, and watching him from the window, duly marked the inelasticity of his step, and shook her head sadly

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over the seductions of Simpson and the terrible expense of coals.

If only she could have guessed what was in John's mind as he slammed the front door behind him, and set his face towards the city! Simpson and the problems of the kitchen fire would have taken, we may be sure, quite a secondary place in her thoughts. And yet the good mother was firmly convinced that she held the keys of the young man's heart, and that he had no secrets from her.

It was fortunate for John that the work that fell to his share that day was for the most part of a purely clerical character. Had it demanded the exercise of any particular thought, there is no telling what might have happened, for he went about his duties like a man in a dream. But after a few years' practice one can fill up official forms and transcribe shorthand notes with perfect success while the mind is disporting itself elsewhere. So John got through the day somehow or other without serious mishap, and even without introducing the name of Victorine into letters about under-writing and long-winded declarations concerning cargoes, as he was several times on the point of doing. That his behaviour was completely normal cannot, indeed, be said. Mr. Werry, the "governor"—an elderly man, with head as bare as a billiard-ball, whiskers that looked as if they had been blown all ways by a recent north-easter, and voice thickened by chronic asthma—Mr. Werry glanced at him sharply once or twice, evidently inclined to ask him if anything was the matter; while his fellow-clerks indulged in sundry sparkling and highly original jests at his

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expense: "Try getting out the other side of the bed to-morrow, Smith; you have no idea what a difference it makes;" and "Take a blue pill to-night, old man, it's good for the liver;" and "I say, Smith, what time's the funeral this afternoon;" and so on. But John acknowledged these sallies with a quiet smile, and met the governor's inquiring eye without flinching; and thus the day, though it seemed interminable, worried on to an end at last. Never more thankfully, though often thankfully enough in all those years of office-routine, had John seized his hat, and with a "Good-night, you fellows!" turned his back upon the hated prison which hemmed him in, with all his vague ambitions and unrealised dreams.

Muddled his poor brain had been all that dreary morning and afternoon, and muddled it continued to be as he rode homeward on the top of his omnibus, quite heedless of the roar and bustle of the traffic about him. Yet by the time he reached Hammer-smith, he had felt his way very clearly to one definite conclusion. Whoever and whatever this Victorine might be, he was in love with her—desperately in love with her. There was no question about that; he might as well acknowledge it to himself, and like a philosopher, acknowledge it he accordingly did. It gave him a greater shock to do this than it would have given most young men, for, unlike most young men, he had not only never been in love before, but had never even imagined himself to be so. He had often enough regretted this untoward circumstance; often enough marvelled over it; contrasting, after his wont, his own perfect emotional freedom with the

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storm of passion which seemed always ready to break, on the slightest provocation, over the devoted heads of his model heroes of romance. But regret, wonder, argument, had been of no avail. You cannot reason yourself out of love, say the sages ; perhaps it is equally to the point sometimes, as it is certainly quite as true, to declare that you cannot reason yourself into it. John's range of social experience had been narrow enough, of course ; but he must have seen many pretty faces, I should suppose, and must once in a while, at any rate, have made personal acquaintance with their owners. Yet with the most absolute readiness, with the heartiest desire to burn himself in the flame, he had hitherto remained unscathed. Now he was singed, and singed badly ; he who had not yet known what it was to carry on even an innocent flirtation. He could not mistake the symptoms ; he had studied them too often in the analyses furnished by those veracious chroniclers of the heart, the writers of sensational fiction. And now that the supreme crisis had come to him, late in life and quite unexpectedly, the poor fellow could hardly tell whether he was more delighted or frightened. Delighted he was, of course ; his blood tingled whenever he said over to himself the mystic words, " I love her, I love her." But the experience was so sudden and strange, it snatched him so roughly out of a world of vague dreams into a world of sharp realities, that he was frightened, terribly frightened, as well

Whoever and whatever this Victorine might be—that qualifying phrase entered perforce into his con-

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fessions; and there, indeed, was the rub. For now that all the excitement of their curious meeting was over, and the inevitable reaction had set in, the impertinent and obnoxious question would assert itself: After all, who was she, and what was she? And to that question he had no answer, nor, for the present, any clue to an answer. The blunt fact of the matter was, that she was a mystery who only got more and more mysterious the more he puzzled himself about her; and though it is interesting enough to read about mysteries, they are apt, as he now began to discover, to cause uneasiness when they get mixed up with one's own concerns. What did he know about her? Nothing; simply nothing! He had met her under conditions which were odd, if not equivocal; he had scraped acquaintance with her by the merest accident, and had talked with her for something less than an hour; and during that time she had conducted herself in a way, or, more correctly speaking, in ways, which, viewed judiciously and in the white light which next morning has a knack of throwing over things, could only be considered—he baulked at the word, but had at length to come to it—could only be considered unladylike. Here was a nice mess for a young man of unimpeachable morality when he woke up one fine day to find himself in love.

He recapitulated the various points which the devil's advocate would not fail to make against her, and asked himself emphatically, as he scored them off one by one, what his mother would have to say to *that*, and *that*, and *that*. In the first place, there was the extraordinary coolness with which she had

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invaded the privacy of his compartment. How she had come to be wandering about London by herself at midnight was a matter concerning which it was useless to guess ; but the fact remained that there she was, an unprotected female ; and John could not make it fit into his preconceived notions of propriety that, under such circumstances, she should have stepped into a railway carriage occupied by a solitary gentleman, even when that gentleman was soundly asleep. Then, when he awoke and discovered her there, nothing could have exceeded her complete insouciance and composure. She had talked to him as freely as any girl might talk to her brother ; had invited him to sit beside her ; had teased and laughed at him ; and had ended by accepting, without hesitation or protest, the escort which, had she been a woman of greater reticence and more conventional behaviour, he knew that he would have been too timid to offer. All this was bad enough, but what had followed was, if possible, a trifle worse. For what could be said about a girl who, after accepting a gentleman's arm, and placing herself under his protection, had read him a lecture about his folly, warned him to conduct himself more circumspectly in the future, and talked openly of matters about which a young woman may be supposed to know nothing, or of which, at any rate, she would not ordinarily be willing to speak ? It was no good insisting that voice and enunciation were eloquent of refinement, that dress and manner declared the lady. The devil's advocate would naturally reply that these were the facts ; and such as they

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were, it was clearly impossible to explain them satisfactorily.

Nor was this all ; for to make the problem still more hopeless, there were the girl's rapid and astounding changes of mood and behaviour. Listening to her gay laugh and inconsequential chatter, one might have pronounced her a giddy and heedless little creature, a thing of high spirits and irrepressible vitality, too innocent to care for the world's opinion, or understand the risks that she ran. But then what about that violent explosion and the awful symbolic child ? What about the sudden passion that had blanched her cheeks, and made her lips quiver, and brought that strange, hard expression into the dancing grey eyes ? It would be pleasant to believe her merely thoughtless and unwitting ; but how could one do that, remembering her own declaration concerning her knowledge of the dark and miry places of life, and the solemn words with which she had taken leave of him, frankly speaking of herself as one with whom he, the respectable John Smith, should have no association, and even making him promise her never to try to see her again ? All this did not seem like girlish innocence. Whatever it suggested, it most assuredly did not suggest that.

In fact, John could make nothing of it ; nor did he succeed any better when he tried to force the inquiry in other directions. What was her nationality ? It was impossible for him, at any rate, with his limited experience of the world, to reach any conclusion on that elemental question. She had practically confessed that she was not English, and had even, to

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John's sorrow, spoken of the English with some asperity. Was she American? She appeared to know America; here and there a phrase or an intonation reminded him of transatlantic business men whom he had met at Werry & Co.'s. But her accent was not exactly American. It was slight, and sometimes hardly perceptible; but what there was of it was distinctly foreign—the accent of a person to whom English is not a native tongue. Yet she spoke English perfectly; with absolute ease and freedom, and, John acknowledged, with a grammatical correctness that might have satisfied the severest critic. Here, then, was another puzzle, upon which no light was thrown by the brief conversation, at which he had assisted, between her and the strange man at the street corner. What language they had used was altogether beyond his ken—he only knew, and of this he was completely confident, that it was a language he had never heard spoken before. Indeed, that last episode of the night's adventures, instead of helping him to any explanation, only plunged him the deeper into darkness and mystery. For who was this red-bearded individual who had risen, as it seemed, suddenly out of the ground, and had accosted her so roughly? Was he expecting her? Had she kept him waiting beyond an appointed hour? What in the world could be the relations between them? These were questions—and questions they had to remain.

Do we wonder that John, as he sat over his supper that evening, seemed moody, abstracted, out of sorts? That with all his well-meaning efforts, he could get up

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very little interest in his mother's interview with the coal-dealer, and the negotiations she had entered into, subject to her son's approval, for the immediate delivery of a considerable supply of fuel? Do we wonder that her solicitude presently got the better of her discretion, and that she began to sound him on the matter of health, the meals he took in the city, and the advisability of purchasing thicker socks? And do we wonder that poor Mrs. Smith's kind inquiries and suggestions drove him nearly crazy, and that he answered her with a bluntness so unusual that it brought the ready tears to her eyes?

It was a miserable evening for them both, and John, at least, was heartily glad when it came to be time for him to make a decent excuse, and go early to bed. Thoroughly exhausted by two broken nights, and the intense excitement of recent events, he presently fell asleep; but not before he had added one more disquieting thought to the many that were already fermenting in his mind.

"If ever you think of me," the girl had said to him, just before they parted, "think of me as Victorine."

Surely he could not mistake the significance of such a remark? It meant that she was anxious to conceal her identity, and that he should understand that she was concealing it. Victorine evidently was not her real name. Was she mad, then, as he almost found himself driven to believe? Or was she, perhaps, some great lady—a foreign princess, say—who had, for some unknown reason, escaped from her country, and was masquerading in disguise?

CHAPTER VI

IS IT A CLUE?

ON the afternoon of the Sunday following, according to his habit, Ben Chadwick dropped in for a chat and a smoke.

Ben illustrated in his own person the beauty and value of the English Sabbath. He rose late, and breakfasted about eleven, without collar or tie—a luxury it was possible for him to indulge in on one morning only out of the seven. Then, if the weather were favourable, he would shamble out in carpet slippers, and stand for a while at the front door taking the air, and gazing, pipe in mouth, with philosophic placidity up and down the street. Having watched the milkman out of sight, exhausted the interest offered by the dirty servant-girl on the other side of the way, and drunk his fill of the general picturesqueness of his surroundings, he would retire to the sanctity of his private apartment, and abandon himself, in his own witty phrase, to an hour's reverie over the *Referee*. This brought him to the two o'clock dinner, for which he would make an imposing toilet, and after which, in all the appropriate glory of billycock hat, tail coat, and stick, he would sally forth in quest of exercise and the intercourse of friends.

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A pleasant and, spiritually considered, a profitable day, and one which it should give us great satisfaction to compare with the Sunday doings of those benighted foreigners among whom the Puritan Sabbath is unknown.

"Hulloa, old man, 'commong voo porty voo,' as the saying is?" cried Mr. Chadwick briskly. "I say, it's a stunning afternoon. Don't you want to take a walk?"

"No, I don't!" replied John decisively.

"Oh, well, if you don't, there's an end of it," said the cheerful Ben. "I only thought a turn round the Mall to Kew Bridge and back would do us both good. I've had a tremendous dinner, and it wants shaking down."

"You go if you like," said John, "and don't bother about me. I'm awfully tired."

"Not a bit of it," was the reply. "I don't care. I'll take a stroll presently. Where's the 'baccy'?"

John indicated the jar beside the soap-dish on the wash-stand—he always used his bedroom as his den, and out of consideration for his mother, smoked only on rare occasions elsewhere in the house—and threw some papers off a chair to make a place for his friend. Then Ben filled and lighted his pipe, and sat down with a sigh which might have startled a stranger by its depth and fulness, but which was probably nothing more than physiological in its origin. Such expression as there was on his broad flabby face bespoke a conscience perfectly at peace with himself and all the world.

John and he had not seen each other since the

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evening before Simpson's reunion—an event which already seemed to the former to have dropped some half-a-dozen years into the past. They now met, it will have been observed, without any great ebullition of feeling on either side. Ben was never given to emotional transports of any kind, regarding them, in his phlegmatic fashion, as “rot”; while John, for his own part, would, on this particular afternoon, have preferred to be left alone with his thoughts.

“Well, and how's old Simpson?” said Mr. Chadwick, after a few preliminary puffs to get the pipe going. “All alive, I suppose, as usual? Did you have a rattling good time?”

Ben had been duly invited to form one of the party, and never on any account willingly let such an opportunity slip by. Simpson's, as we are aware, was considered, in the set to which Ben and John belonged, as quite the place to go to. But it unfortunately happened that just one hour before the receipt of his note of invitation—which was brief and humorous, being thus conceived: “Dear Chad,—I am going to have some fellows round on Wednesday evening next. Come, too. You can put on a clean collar if you like.—Yours, R. S.”—it unfortunately happened, we say, that just one hour before the receipt of this brilliant and characteristic epistle, Ben had committed himself to another engagement for that same evening—an engagement of a very much less exciting kind. The malice of Fate has often been referred to by philosophers, though they seldom, perhaps, employ quite such vigorous language as Chad did on this occasion.

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John answered that they had, as usual, had a rattling good time ; and, pressed by Ben, proceeded into details, giving some account of the fellows who had been present, the songs they had sung, and the nature and variety of the articles they had mainly depended upon for inspiration ; but he spoke without enthusiasm. A party at Simpson's was ordinarily an event of the first importance for him. In this instance, however, it had been swallowed up in matters of much larger interest.

Ben listened quietly, putting an occasional question, and nodding his head now and then over some special item of information. When John had come to the end of his narrative, he took his pipe slowly out of his mouth, pressed down the tobacco with his thumb, and said, quite inappropriately :

" You're not looking up to snuff, old man. What's the matter ? A bit off your feed, eh ? "

A man doesn't like to be told repeatedly that he's not looking well, especially when he knows that he isn't. John must be forgiven if he answered his friend with a testy " Oh, I'm all right ! " without adding a " thank you " to round the statement off to a decent close. Excitement and mental worry had told upon him, and he was undeniably pale and worn. This fact every acquaintance whom he had chanced to meet during the past few days had been studiously careful to keep before his attention, and John was tired of it.

Mr. Chadwick rose, knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and took his hat from the bed. He was not gifted with abnormal powers of penetration ; but

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then, no abnormal powers of penetration were needed to convince him that here was an occasion on which his room would be quite as welcome as his company.

"You're not going?" said John.

"Yes," answered Ben; "I think I'd better go." It was on the tip of his tongue to make some remark in reference to the likelihood of his getting the blues if he stayed longer, but wiser counsels prevailed. "My dinner doesn't seem to be settling exactly right," he went on, by way of explanation. "I don't know how it is, but somehow I can't seem to stand roast pork and apple dumplings as well as I used to; I find them sit heavy. It's a sign I'm getting old, I suppose. Well, I'll take a bit of a walk. See you again soon, old bird! O reservoir!"

John stirred himself from his lethargy. He hated to feel that he was driving his friend away by his own shabby behaviour.

"Wait a bit!" he said. "I haven't seen you for nearly a week. What have you been doing with yourself?"

Ben stood by the bed, with his hat on the back of his head, cogitating. John had put an innocent question out of the promptings of good-fellowship, really caring not one straw how Ben had recently been turning his time to profit. Little did he guess to what that simple question was to lead.

"Oh, I haven't been doing much," Chadwick replied. "Went round one evening to see o d Morlox, and had a precious dull time. To play cribbage hour after hour with him and the re-

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spected Daddy gets pretty tiresome, and then I—oh, yes, I had almost forgotten!—I went one night with some fellows to the ‘Mews.’”

“Oh!” said John, doing his best to keep up a semblance of interest. (“Mews,” the refined reader may require to be informed, is the nickname current in certain circles of one of the smaller and less famous of the London music-halls.) “Anything special going on there?” John asked, gazing vacantly into the street.

“No,” said Ben emphatically, “nothing; it’s all the same old fakes.” It was Mr. Chadwick’s habit to enjoy himself prodigiously wherever he went, and then growl a good deal about it afterwards. A person entering into casual conversation with him might have supposed him to be afflicted with satiety, *weltschmerz*, and other fashionable maladies, but no judgment could be wider of the mark. “However,” he continued, “they’re going to have a complete new bill there next week, and they do say it’s a good one. There’s a dandy conjurer coming, and a fellow who rides the bicycle standing on his head, and a ripping new comic singer that Dykes says he heard the other day somewhere in the north—a French girl, he says and scrumptious.”

“Oh!” said John again, determined to hold up his end of the conversation with proper politeness till Ben saw fit to take his departure. Balancing the tobacco-jar on his knees, he began moodily to fill his pipe. “A new singer, eh? Who is she?”

“Well, Dykes says her name’s Victorine—”

“What!” roared John, bounding out of his chair,

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sending pipe and jar flying, and scattering the tobacco all over the floor.

If Mr. Chadwick had possessed even a rudimentary notion of dramatic propriety, we might here have had a very pretty situation to describe. But he was altogether unequal to the occasion. He simply sat down, meekly and ineffectively, on the side of the bed.

"Well, John, are you taken worse?" he asked blankly. "You *are* a chump, and no mistake. You've smashed the tobacco jar—"

"Damn the tobacco jar!" shouted John, seizing his friend's shoulder. "What did you say her name was?"

"I didn't say it was anything," replied Ben doggedly. "I only said that Dykes said it was Victorine."

His tones were those of a man who wishes it to be clearly understood that he takes no individual responsibility for his statements.

"It can't be," said John, very slowly.

"Can't be, indeed!" exclaimed his friend. "What the doose is the matter with you, this afternoon? Can't be? Why can't it be? I don't know anything about it myself, but Dykes said the name was Victorine. I'll take my oath to that."

John had walked over to the window, and stood with his back to Ben, gazing out. Ben rose to his feet.

"Perhaps you'll be good enough to tell me," he said, with studied politeness, "what it is that makes you so devilish touchy this afternoon? I never saw

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you in such a pucker. S'pose the French gal's name is Victorine; what's that to you, eh? There's no harm in it, is there? A woman can call herself what she likes without asking *you*, I imagine. You needn't jump down a chap's throat."

"Ben," said John hoarsely, turning on his heel, "tell me—what is she like?"

Ben's countenance expressed mingled astonishment and contempt.

"I'd see a doctor if I were you, John," he said. "It isn't natural, you know—'pon my word, it isn't."

"Don't be a fool!" retorted John, still trembling with excitement. "What isn't natural? I ask you what Vict—what this—this French girl is like?"

"And how the dickens do I know what she is like? Didn't I tell you that I'd never seen her? Ask Dykes. Fool, indeed! Who's the fool, I should like to know?"

Ben rammed his hat quite fiercely down on his head, and seized his walking-stick. John went back to the window.

There was a pause.

"Well," said Mr. Chadwick at length, "have you anything to tell me about this Victorine, and what particularly her coming up to London can have to do with you? If so, I shall be charmed to hear it."

He still spoke slowly, and with marked distance of manner.

John did not reply.

"Then I'll decamp," said the other, dropping into the colloquial. "Good-bye! Take my advice and see a doctor."

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"Stay, Ben," cried John, calling him back for the second time that afternoon. "Don't go away angry, old fellow! I couldn't help it. What you told me was so sudden—so—so unexpected—so—so surprising—it—it knocked the wind out of me for a minute. I'm awfully sorry, but I can't talk about it now. Some time or the other, perhaps, you shall know all about it; but not this afternoon. You don't understand now; but—but—" he held out his hand, and Ben, like a good fellow, took it, and returned its friendly pressure. "Go and take your walk. I'm all upset and stupid, and—and—bilious, or something; and I'm not fit company for anyone. Ta-ta! Drop round again soon, won't you?"

"You may expect to see yours obediently before very long," replied Ben, making a noble effort to regain his ordinary nonchalance of tone and bearing. He was not an imaginative man, or one given to fanciful anxieties; but he was deeply worried over John's condition. "I really think you'd better see a doctor," he said pleadingly in parting; "it never does any harm, you know—I daresay it's liver—and a pill, and that sort of thing, helps to set a fellow right."

With this last bit of advice, he started off for the Mall; but there was an unwonted look of worry in his face, and once in a while he shook his head, like a man in doubt.

CHAPTER VII

AT THE "MEWS," AND AFTERWARDS

THE hall, colloquially known as the "Mews," and dedicated (see advertisement) to variety entertainments of strictly refined character, is located in a narrow and dingy side-street in the salubrious neighbourhood of Drury Lane. Though he had never, to his recollection, been within a quarter of a mile of the spot before, since he was accustomed to gratify his own æsthetic cravings at the larger places of popular resort, such as the "Oxford" and the "Pav.," John Smith found his way thither the next evening without difficulty, after a day at the office which had threatened never to come to a close.

Of course, in his excitement, he contrived to reach the scene an hour or so before the time fixed for the opening of the doors ; and he was altogether too restless to take up his position in the small group that presently formed outside the shilling entrance. He knew enough of such places to be aware that business at the "Mews" would be relatively slack on a Monday evening, and that, without lining up, he might be certain of a very fair place in the house. So he paced up and down the street, aimlessly watching a few dirty children at play on the pave-

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ment, and reading over and over again, as one intent upon forcing the ultimate secret out of its bald and simple words, the bill which announced the first appearance on any London stage of the dashing French *chanteuse* and *comédienne*, Mademoiselle Victorine. And over and over again the question which had tormented him all day long arose with a fresh vigour of meaning, and set his brain in a whirl. Could this queen of the music-hall be *his* Victorine? In the name of all that was strange and wonderful, was it possible? Since his conversation with Ben Chadwick the previous afternoon, he had thought only, and with ever-growing delight, of the chance of rediscovering her, swallowed as she had been in all the vastness of London. Now, as he more vividly realised the circumstances of the case, hope began to change into something very much like despair. Nor was this the worst. For even in more sanguine moments during his restless pacing to and fro, the pleasure of anticipation was chilled by the first suggestions of revolt. He had felt himself willing to stake everything to find the girl again who had touched his dull life with such a new and subtle charm. And yet—would he, after all, be quite contented to discover her—the radiant maiden whom he had already invested with the most delicate halo of romance—in some flaunting, half-dressed, over-painted singer of foolish and risky songs? Could he with any sort of satisfaction exchange his cherished memories and his dainty dreams for so coarse and disenchanting a reality? More than once he shuddered at the thought; and

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when at length the tardy door was thrown open, he even hung back for an instant, with doubt deepening fast into dread.

But only for an instant. Curiosity and desire were stronger than the newly-arisen and perhaps rather fantastic fear of possible disillusion. He followed in the wake of the motley crowd that had gathered by slow accretions, and now surged forward with a deadly determination which might have suggested to any onlooker that issues of vital importance depended upon their exertions, paid his shilling, and hurried in, easily finding a seat that commanded a good view of the stage.

A glance at the programme filled John with a feeling of disgust, which found vent in some muttered remarks fortunately inaudible to the fat and voluble lady at his side. Clearly the Fates were against him. Mademoiselle Victorine was announced for the last "turn" but one in the evening's over-generous bill of fare. Could anything have been more exasperating? Sick with apprehension and excitement, he would thus have to wait there three mortal hours before— He passed his hand over his damp forehead, and wondered how he could ever stand the strain.

It would have been too much to expect that he should carry away with him any distinct idea of that evening's performance. He remembered in the vaguest way—as one catches at the confused images in a feverish dream—the principal items of what seemed to him the longest, and dreariest, and most absolutely inane entertainment it had ever been his

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ill-luck to witness : the fancy bicycle-riders who rode round the stage with their heads on their saddles, and their hands where their feet should have been ; the stupid monologist who enacted drunkenness with a realism which might almost appear to be beyond the reach of art, and told spicy anecdotes of marital infelicities ; the conjurer who extracted a beef-steak pie from the crown of a silk hat ; the dancing girl with alarmingly short skirts, and legs which, though undeniably shapely, were so loose-jointed that they gave one the odd impression that they did not really belong to her ; the topical singer, in immaculate evening dress, whose patriotic personalities were hailed with a perfect howl of satisfaction ; the three negro comedians who made hideous faces, rolled large white eyes, exposed rows of admirable teeth, exchanged time-worn jokes, and *à propos* of nothing in particular, warbled pathetic ditties about mother and the old, old home. All these things John afterwards remembered, with the sense that they belonged to some far-away past. He remembered, too, marvelling greatly within himself why the people about him laughed uproariously at every stale witticism, and what they saw that was so bewilderingly beautiful about the dancer's abbreviated petticoats and twinkling feet. He recalled with a sort of subdued amusement the astonished glance which from time to time the fat lady directed upon his own stolid face ; and he recollected going twice, at least—he could not be certain that it was not more than twice—to the bar at the bottom of the hall, and returning to his place with a

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consciousness of flushed cheeks, and a feeling that he was looking at the stage through a tremulous haze.

At last the long tension, which was rapidly growing unendurable, came to an end. The negro comedians finished their tender reminiscences of childhood and domestic love, and by way of encore—for an encore was insisted upon—rattled off some rollicking verses about the extraordinary conduct of a yaller girl, which effectively cleared the air of sentiment, and made the fat lady, who had evidently been on the point of weeping, literally shake her sides with laughter. A moment more, and Victorine herself would be there before him, and the question whether she was really his Victorine or not solved for good or ill. Giddy with suppressed excitement now that the crisis had come, even wishing at the bottom of his heart that something might happen—say, that some extra “turn” might be introduced—to stave the fatal revelation off a few minutes longer, John leaned forward, with parched lips and hands that convulsively clutched the back of the seat before him, while the number was changed in the indicator, and the orchestra struck up the opening bars of a lively melody. Then the curtain was rung up, and a faint murmur of applause went round the house as the dashing new French *chanteuse* swept smilingly upon the stage. And then—

And then the hall seemed to spin about him, and heave like a ship at sea, as he plunged towards the door. The next minute he caught his breath in the fresh air of the open street.

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"Feeling faint, sir?" asked a solicitous policeman, who was standing in the entrance.

"No, no, thanks!" stammered John; "there's nothing the matter. I'll be all right directly. It was the heat."

And he turned and walked rapidly down the street.

What a fool he had been! He might have known it all along. What! that creature with the rouged cheeks and the impudent eyes, and the shrill, metallic voice, and a costume abominable in its grotesque vulgarity—that woman *his* Victorine! Why, she must have weighed twelve stone if she weighed a pound, and be fifty years old if a day. Horrors! Why, it was nothing short of sacrilege to have connected, even by blunder, and in his passing thought, that loud-mouthed, shameless old harridan with the bright fresh girl whose lightest tones still caressed his ear, and whose delicate face and slim, young figure haunted his memory night and day. Yes, what a fool he had been! He had wasted his time, and made himself ill with agitation, and all for nothing! For nothing? No; not quite for nothing. For it was surely some satisfaction to have proved—though why should proof ever have been necessary?—that *his* Victorine was not—the mere idea of such a thing now seemed to him monstrous—was not a common music-hall singer. For a while, as he strode on and on, through one deserted street into another, caring not whither he went, John found himself positively rejoicing that his evening's quest had ended in failure. Could he have wished it to end otherwise? But the

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pleasure was soon tempered by other considerations. His pace suddenly slackened as he remembered what his failure implied. He had set out that night in the hope, even in the expectation, of finding the girl he had met and lost ; and now that his supposed clue had led him nowhere, he was as far from finding her as ever.

Unwonted physical exertion will sometimes do wonders, not only in stimulating the circulation, but also in pacifying the brain. After half an hour of reckless walking, now in one direction, now in another, John came to himself, to discover that he had got himself entangled in a maze of narrow and tortuous streets, which at that time of night, as he now suddenly realised, were unpleasantly dark and lonely. It was quite unheroic, to be sure ; but the notion presented itself to him with startling vividness that he would gain nothing by beating the pavements in an unsalubrious neighbourhood where he had no possible business, and that, considering the advanced hour, by all odds the safest and sanest course for him to adopt was simply to go straight home and to bed. One's appetite for thrilling adventure is, like other fine things in life, curiously mixed up with vulgar bodily needs, and is apt to decline when one grows tired and hungry ; and John now remembered with a pang how little dinner he had eaten in that chop-house in the city some six hours ago. He proceeded, therefore, to deliberate on his whereabouts, and concluding, with a Cockney's instinct for location, that, as he was now in the purlieus of Clare Market, his quickest way out of the labyrinth lay towards the

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Strand, he turned right-about face, and set off sharply in what he conceived to be the direction of that historic thoroughfare. And oddly enough, though the veracious historian greatly regrets to have to record such weakness, his dreams of love and romance receded for the time being into the background. His attention was now chiefly taken up with the shaping of his course, his anxiety to reach a familiar landmark, his avoidance from time to time, by an opportune crossing of the street, of a dimly outlined figure in the shadow of a doorway or an arch. And with these concerns there mingled various questions about the last 'bus for Hammersmith, and the possibility of discovering, on his return home, that maternal prescience had left out on the kitchen-table a substantial loaf, with cheese to match.

But John Smith's evening of reconnoitre, uneventful as thus far it had certainly been, was destined not to close without its item of adventure. He had not embarked upon his new romantic career for the purpose simply of going home that night to eat his supper in peace, and fall asleep with thoughts of the Victorine he had not unearthed chasing one another through his weary brain. If the delicious thrill of seeing her once again had not been vouchsafed him, he was now to learn that Fate had kept in store for him a sensation of a somewhat different kind.

He had just at length realised his precise whereabouts, and had breathed a sigh of relief to find himself within a stone's throw of St. Clement's Danes, when, making a rapid turn round a corner, he cannoned straight into a couple of men who were

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walking slowly in the opposite direction. The collision was so unexpected that for a moment John was dazed.

"Damn you ! can't you see where you're going, you idiot !" exclaimed the man nearest the wall, giving John an angry shove with his elbow.

"I—I beg your pardon, I'm sure !" John stammered, recovering himself as best he might. "I really didn't mean—I—"

The yellow glare of the lamp hard by fell full upon the faces of the men, and as John collected his senses, he gave a violent start. He saw that the individual who had addressed him with such a singular lack of suavity was a tall, raw-boned young fellow, hatchet-faced, with a long, trailing moustache and great goggle-glasses. His companion was quite as tall, but was much more massively built ; his face was swarthy ; his keen black eyes glittered fiercely beneath his shaggy eyebrows ; and he wore a short, bristly, untidy red beard.

John recognised him at a glance. He was the man who, the other night, had surprised him in conversation with Victorine, and had taken the girl away.

The stammered apology died uncompleted upon his lips.

"Perhaps you'll keep your wits about you another time, duffer," growled the impolite young man. He linked his arm impetuously in his friend's, and the next moment the two had disappeared round the corner.

John stood rooted to the spot, his face fixed in an absurd expression of astonishment. Then a sense of

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the full possibilities of the strange encounter swept over him, and set his heart beating fast. That shaggy, red-bearded man with the piercing black eyes had been far enough from his thoughts during his evening's excitement. And yet to have rediscovered him by this odd accident might, after all, prove to be the next best thing to rediscovering Victorine herself. Here was his chance. He would follow him, and gain a bit of information which might presently be of service by learning his destination.

Too thoroughly intent upon his design to appreciate the fine dramatic qualities of the situation, John crept stealthily but quickly round the corner, in the hope that the two men had not yet got out of sight. It took him but an instant to satisfy himself that they had indeed not done so; for at the very turn he again came face to face with them. They were standing close together in the shadow, apparently deep in whispered colloquy.

This was not at all what John had calculated upon, and he recoiled with a half-stifled exclamation of astonishment.

"Yes, dat is de man," he heard the red-bearded individual say in a tone of conviction to his companion. And two pairs of eyes—one black and piercing beneath the shaggiest of eyebrows, one gleaming angrily through monstrous goggle-glasses—were fixed with sharpest scrutiny upon his face.

"Oh, that's the man, is it?" retorted the fierce young fellow. "Well, I should know his ugly phiz again anywhere."

Poor John Smith! Alas, for all his long-cherished

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dreams of heroism, and adventure, and romance! Surely the opportunity for which he had waited and yearned through all the long dull years had come to him at last! And by way of showing how he could rise to a great occasion, he turned incontinently and fled.

CHAPTER VIII

IN WHICH JOHN SMITH BEGINS TO REALISE THAT THINGS MAY HAPPEN IN LIFE

DURING the next few days, on his stool in the city, at meals, in bed, John was able to think of little beyond his midnight encounter with the two strange men ; and the more he thought of it, the less he liked it. It must be remembered that, in spite of all his romantic aspirations, he was in reality the very mildest and most guileless of young fellows, in whose imagination it seemed the simplest thing in the world to shoot half-a-dozen bandits, but who would have been hard put to had he been forced to kill a rat. The first taste of genuine adventure—the first acute realisation that he had stepped out of his dull routine of life into a dim region of dramatic possibility beyond, thus proved altogether too much for him ; and an incident which would have been trifling enough to read or dream about began to prey upon his mind. The result was that he lost his appetite and his power of sleep, and grew pale, nervous, and abstracted. At the office he was more than once sharply reprimanded by Mr. Boroughgate, the managing clerk, for carelessness and inattention. At home his mother, observing his fits of preoccupa-

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tion, and his frequent starts and twitches, became seriously concerned about his health, and commenced a systematic course of beef-tea and domestic medicine, to which the unfortunate hero had to submit with the best grace possible as the one way of avoiding the torment of persistent cross-examinations. And when, one evening, he chanced to fall in with Ben Chadwick, whom, under the circumstances, he would most willingly have eluded, that gentleman shook his head more dubiously than ever, and spoke quite urgently of pills.

Naturally enough, one principal cause of John's tumult of mind lay in the question of the identity of the two men who had dropped so suddenly and—yes, there were moments when he was ready to acknowledge it—so unpleasantly into his life. Who could they be? And—there was the special issue—where could be the point of intimate contact between them and Victorine? For point of intimate contact there was, John was assured. He had not forgotten how, that memorable night of meeting and losing, the elder of the twain—the individual with the quick black eyes and untidy red beard—had pounced upon them from somewhere out of the darkness; and what had then occurred had sufficed to convince him, as he remembered well to his mystification and chagrin, that the relations between them were of the freest and most friendly character. As for this shaggy person's companion—the thin, ferocious young fellow, with the trailing moustache and the goggle-glasses—it is true that he had no immediate reason to conclude that he likewise enjoyed the girl's good graces;

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yet that the inference that he did so was almost inevitable will become manifest if we recollect how greatly it added to our friend's discomfort. John was just far enough gone in love to find a very genuine, if somewhat dismal, kind of satisfaction in the thought of the utter hopelessness of his passion ; and owing to his peculiar temperament, and the half-unreal or dramatic quality of his emotion, there was for him peculiar pungency in the notion of playing the faithful but unfavoured lover.

He delighted, therefore, to torture himself with the construction of hypothetical romances of domestic relationship, in which, whatever the other lines of connection might be, one or other of the two strangers was bound to figure as Victorine's husband, actual or to be. On the whole, for some totally unassignable reason—for who can ever explain these bizarre tricks of fancy?—he inclined to the conclusion that the red-bearded individual was the fortunate man ; that Victorine had been his wife perhaps a year, perhaps two years ; and that the ferocious young fellow was either his brother or hers. And yet how absurd the thing seemed to be when one looked at it a little critically ! How absurd, for that matter, anything which sought to bring Victorine and the two men together on any rational family basis ! For though he might amuse as well as worry himself by posing as faithful and unfavoured lover, his whole soul revolted against the idea that she could possibly belong, that she ever would belong, to either one of those unspeakable rivals, or that any ties of blood could conceivably exist between them.

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But there was something fermenting in John's mind worse than all this. Bound up with the question of the two men's identity was the other exceedingly personal and exceedingly grave question of their interest in him. That they were interested in him hardly admitted of doubt. The red-bearded individual had recognised him; he had pointed him out to the ferocious young fellow, and the ferocious young fellow had testified to the accuracy with which he had taken observation of him. "Yes, that *is* the man," the one had declared; and the other had responded, with lamentable lack of politeness, that he would know his (John's) ugly phiz again anywhere. The recollection of this trifling incident in the night's adventures was distinctly uncomfortable. John felt that the tables had been most unfairly turned upon him. It was well enough for him to do a little unearthing on his own account, even though it were done by accident. That was quite proper; it belonged, one might say, to his new rôle of romantic hero. But to find himself, on his side, unearthed by the other fellow—that was something that he had never bargained for, and which (there was no disguising the matter) he did not by any means like. It gave him an odd, creepy feeling somewhere in his bones. And he asked himself again and again: What in the world could the two men want with *him*? Why had they waited round the corner, evidently debating whether they should or should not track him? Why had the one who had surprised him with Victorine been so decisive in his indication of him to the other who had never

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seen him before? To these questions there was no answer. But it became more and more clear, as he thought over them, that he must have got, so to speak, into the wrong end of a romance. And this idea did not please him at all. He had dreamed of weaving a drama for himself according to his own fancy, holding the threads of the story always firmly in hand. It now began to occur to him that it would be a vastly different thing if his material, moving beyond his control, took to fashioning patterns on its own account—more especially if he himself, instead of being the architect and director of the performance, came to be caught up and woven in as one of the threads.

It was odd that, after all the years he had given to the study of fiction and plays, he now realised the possibility of such an unprecedented development of affairs for the first time, and with the sudden shock of surprise. Things had never turned out in that fashion in his favourite novels! If John had only been somewhat more of a philosopher, he might have remembered that when the gods take to answering our prayers, they are apt to do so in ways that are calculated to cause us some little astonishment.

Meanwhile, the gad-fly of curiosity that had got possession of him gave him no rest.

"You're late again, John," Mrs. Smith would say to him, evening after evening, as he entered their little sitting-room at eight, nine, or even ten o'clock. And the good woman might well make remarks, since John was due home, in the regular course of business at seven.

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"Well, I can't help it, mother," the young man would reply petulantly, or wearily, or apologetically, as the case might be, sitting down, but without much show of interest, to the supper that was spread for him at one end of the table. "You know there are times—"

"Oh, I'm not complaining, John dear," Mrs. Smith's answer would be. "Of course, when you are kept at the office, you can't help it. But I am so sorry you happen to be busy just when you are feeling so much out of sorts. I'm afraid you are in no condition to stand the strain of constant overwork."

John would drop his eyes uneasily before the anxious maternal gaze, and protest that he was really feeling better to-day; and so the talk would go on till the time came when he could decently escape to his own room on the pretext that he was tired, and that perhaps it would be wise for him to go straight to bed.

"Yes, go, by all means, my dear," Mrs. Smith would rejoin, as she took his good-night kiss. "And mind, John"—this always as he was on his way upstairs—"don't forget to take your medicine. You'll find it in the glass on the washstand."

Do you imagine that, in a skulking kind of a fashion, John Smith was not really ashamed of himself? Let us give the foolish fellow his due. It did not come naturally to him to deceive his mother night after night. It made him thoroughly uncomfortable to keep what had grown to be the deepest, at any rate the most urgent, interest in his life an utter

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secret from her. It did not make matters much better for him that he was careful not to tell her—or, at least, not to tell her more frequently than he found imperatively necessary—direct, unvarnished, unmitigated lies. He was living apart from her, was guilty of falsehood towards her, all the same.

For knowing so much about him that poor Mrs. Smith did not even dream of, we need not follow her in inferring that, because he did not turn up at home till eight, or nine, or ten at night for a whole week together, unusual pressure of business at the office was necessarily the cause. Likewise, we may remember that a young man may grow pale and lose his wonted appetite for other reasons than over-close attention to daily duty. In point of fact, there was no unusual pressure of business at the office at the time, where, indeed, things were, on the whole, rather slacker than the "governor" liked; and therefore, if John did not, punctually upon the stroke of six, put away his papers, lock up his desk, and take his hat and coat from their appointed peg, the fault would simply have been his own.

If, then, you wanted an explanation of the tardiness of John's appearance in his mother's sitting-room, of the physical weariness that revealed itself in every gesture, and of the alternating apathy and acrimony of manner which appeared to be getting habitual with him, you would have found it by following him in his long, weary tramps in and out and round about the streets and squares of Bloomsbury, and over the whole area bounded by Tottenham Court Road, New Oxford Street, Southampton Row,

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and the Euston Road. There he wandered, like an unhappy spirit, in the darkness, now loitering almost aimlessly by shop-windows, now lingering at street corners, now pausing as if in doubt before the arched gate of some chance house, now stooping to investigate a stray kitten piping its forlornness by some inhospitable railings, and now dashing forward at a pace which would have led you to suppose that it was a matter of life and death with him that he should catch a certain train. Even the marked unpleasantness of the weather during the whole of that week—the dark, yellow fog of one evening, the raw, penetrating drizzle of the next—proved insufficient to discourage him; nor did he allow himself to be more than temporarily embarrassed by the sharp glance of inquiry which a policeman on his beat would sometimes turn upon him as he hurried or dawdled past. Night after night he persevered in his peregrinations, until by-and-by he got to know almost every house and shop in the vicinity, every pillar-box and lamp-post, the familiars of the various public-houses, the servant-girls on their occasional errands to and fro. And night after night he went to bed in sheer exhaustion and disgust, to chafe through many sleepless hours under the irritation of repeated failure, and to vow feebly that he would throw up the whole idiotic business. For never once was he rewarded by a momentary glimpse of anyone who looked in the remotest degree like Victorine, or even—which would have been the next best thing—by a sight of either of the two men whom he longed as much as he dreaded to see again. Of course, he

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remembered exactly the spot where he and the girl had parted company after their never-to-be-forgotten walk from Portland Road Station ; he knew, from her own admission, that her destination that evening had been somewhere immediately thereabouts, and it was not unnatural, therefore, that he should have made up his mind that if he only stuck long enough to the exploration of the neighbourhood, the chances were that he would eventually come across some traces of her or her associates. That, at any rate, would be the way in which things would shape themselves for the recompense of the patient hero in any properly-constituted novel. But though John held to his quest with a courage which we are bound to describe as admirable, the happy accident for which his favourite works of fiction had taught him to look still obstinately refused to come to his relief.

Just how long, circumstances permitting, John might have been willing to keep up his seemingly hopeless game with destiny, it is impossible to say ; for by the end of the week feverish anxiety, constant exposure, and careless feeding had begun to tell upon him, and he came down with a heavy cold. All Sunday he lay in bed sneezing and groaning, and by no means greatly exhilarated by his mother's openly expressed belief that he was on the verge of rheumatic fever, pneumonia, bronchitis, or all these combined ; and though on Monday morning he managed to summon up energy and ambition enough to crawl, sneezing and groaning still, as far as the city, he was well aware that for the

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time being a period had been put to his nocturnal prowlings. Only one course was now open to him : to stand passively aside, and allow matters to go their own way. Instead of wandering about the damp and chilly streets of Bloomsbury, therefore, he returned to his normal habits, hurried home every day as soon as the office was closed, and spent his evening in an arm-chair by the fire dozing over the *Echo*, or discussing local intelligence with his mother. It was not heroic, certainly ; and it made him positively wretched, while Mrs. Smith held forth to him on the progress of the next-door baby and the scarcity of vegetables, to realise how the romance that had opened so brilliantly threatened, after all, to fritter itself away to a most pitifully lame and impotent conclusion. But what was he to do ? What is any fellow to do when his eyes begin to water without provocation, and his head is all a-buzz ? So far as John could remember, the behaviour of heroes under these trying conditions has never yet been set forth in detail—a regrettable omission on the part of the chroniclers. Having no precedent before him, he simply collapsed.

But these few days of influenza and reaction were to form only a brief prosaic interlude in the development of John Smith's romantic story. Just as his life seemed about to slip back into its ordinary placid and uneventful routine, something was to happen to fill it with restlessness and fever again ; and, of course, this something was to occur precisely when he was least expecting it.

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Several weeks had now gone by since the Sunday of his utter prostration, and he was beginning to feel, as Mr. Chadwick elegantly expressed it for him, "pretty steady on his pins again," when it chanced that one afternoon he was sent from the office on a business affair of some importance in the neighbourhood of Limehouse Basin. The short November day was already drawing in when, the matter despatched, John turned into the main thoroughfare, and after holding a brief debate with himself on the relative merits of the various possible routes back to the city, concluded that he would make for the nearest railway station. It had been a dull and murky afternoon, and the rain which had long been threatening now began to descend in a thick, heavy mist of the description usually known as Scotch—the sort of drizzle which, for all its quiet, undemonstrative style of procedure, possesses almost unequalled powers of penetration. He paused for a moment to button his collar about him, and put up his umbrella; and as he did so, he became suddenly aware that a man very tightly muffled up in an immense overcoat, which might have done duty in the Arctic regions, was observing his performance with something more than casual attention from the shadow of a doorstep near by. For the instant, he did not attach any importance to the stranger's scrutiny, and, indeed, as soon as his arrangements were completed, started forward again without giving it a second thought. He had gone hardly a hundred yards, however, when the oddness of the circumstance struck him with sudden force, and looking back, he saw that the man was perhaps

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a quarter of that distance behind him. John's heart came into his mouth. He was being followed! The inference was a rapid one, certainly; but, after his ridiculous fashion, he reached it at a single bound, heedless of any consideration that the apparent pursuit—and surely there was nothing so very remarkable about one man's walking behind another, at that time of the day, down the Commercial Road—might after all be only another case of Madame Blaize and the King. He quickened his pace, only to find that his mysterious pursuer did the same. He crossed and recrossed the street with an insolitude about vehicles which brought him into imminent danger of being run down; he dodged behind a brewer's dray; plunged into a tobacconist's shop, and over the purchase of three pennyworth of honey-dew, held a brief conversation with the fat Jewish woman at the counter on the subject of the weather—his eye always on the door; he made a detour through several side streets, and emerged from their darkness and silence, glad enough to return to the main thoroughfare, with its shops and bustle, only to find that the man was still close on his heels. Filled now with genuine alarm, he broke into a sharp trot, and with a final dash, rushed into the booking-office of the station. "Third—single—Fenchurch Street!" he panted, with hardly breath to get out the words. "Change, sir!" bawled the man, as John was tearing off, forgetting the coppers that came to him out of his shilling. He turned to clutch them with his trembling fingers. "One third-class single to Fenchurch Street, if you please," said a voice, with great

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deliberation, at his side. One quick glance was enough. In an instant, despite the coat-collar which muffled part of the face, and the hat rammed tightly down over the brow, John recognised the long, trailing moustache and great goggle-glasses of the rude young man.

Ticket in hand, he turned from the booking-office, elbowed his way through an incoming stream of steaming, ill-tempered humanity, and fled back into the street. An omnibus was just passing, city-bound. "Full inside, sir," said the conductor, as John sprang on the step, and stood there an instant, dazed and reeling. He was in no mood to trouble himself about a little physical discomfort. He clambered to the top of the vehicle, and found himself in the company of one small boy, who, with a dripping tarpaulin wrapped round his shoulders, was whistling, with an ear-piercing shrillness only achievable by his kind, one of the popular music-hall melodies of the day.

Peering over the railing of the omnibus into the darkness, now this side and now that, John drew a long sigh of relief, though his heart was still pumping away fiercely as a result of his recent excitement. At least, he had escaped. There was no sign of the stranger anywhere.

In a few minutes the small boy descended, whistling more loudly than ever, and John had the top of the conveyance to himself. It was very wet, very cold, very dismal, unspeakably uncomfortable; but he did not care. He was aware only of an intense feeling of satisfaction in having, by a bold change of plan,

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baffled his pursuer, and got safely away. But what a narrow squeak it had been ! And though for this time he had made good his escape, the ugly fact remained — he had been followed, and the chances were that those who, for some unknown and undivine reason, seemed to have developed so keen an interest in him, would not rest until they had got on his track again. And then—well, what then ?

John was so busy over this question, and the alarming speculations to which it gave rise, that he did not notice—and, indeed, in the crowded condition of the streets, would not, under any circumstances, have been likely to notice—that a hansom cab, maintaining a steadiness of pace quite remarkable in a vehicle belonging to so sprightly a class, was meanwhile crawling along behind the omnibus, sometimes almost coming up with it, but never exhibiting the slightest disposition to pass it on the way. Nor did he observe that, when he got down at the corner of Leadenhall Street, the cab forsook the omnibus, the driver, or whatever passenger may have been shut in behind the glass doors, appearing to have business in precisely those same narrow, and now well-nigh deserted, streets by which John made a short cut to his office in St. Mary Axe. Deep in thought, he reached that building, ran upstairs to his own room, locked the papers he had brought from Limehouse safely in his desk, descended the stairs again, and once more strode out into the darkness and the drizzle. And now another shock was in store for him. Just opposite the door, on the further side of the street, stood the same closely-muffled figure, with

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the light of the nearest lamp gleaming from the great goggle-glasses beneath his heavy hat. John stopped sharp in a moment, rooted to the spot. As he did so, the man turned and quietly walked away.

And when John went to bed that night, and, for prophylactic reasons, gulped down the glass of stiff whisky-lemonade which the careful mother brought piping hot to his side, he found himself most unpleasantly convinced of two points—first, that it was quite possible for things to happen in life beyond one's expectation and even one's desire; and secondly, that he had unquestionably got into the wrong end of his romance. There could be no doubt about it—he was plunging blindfold into some serious, though mysterious danger. And meanwhile, though he was thus tempting an unguessed but perhaps terrible fate, the real object of all his recent adventures and dreams was as yet as far off as ever. For he had not got even a glimpse of Victorine, and knew no more than we had done at the beginning how and where, if at all, she was to be found.

CHAPTER IX

ANOTHER TURN OF THE SCREW

A COUPLE of mornings later, when John reached the office several minutes after time, he noticed that the red-headed messenger-boy, whose duty it was to take the names of callers and run on miscellaneous errands, acknowledged his curt matutinal greeting with what even for him was a peculiarly broad grin ; and entering his own room, he found three of his colleagues making merry among themselves over something which lay on his desk.

"Looks like a lady's handwriting, too," one was just saying, as he closed the door behind him ; and there was a roar of laughter.

"I say, Smith, you fraud," said another—a cross-eyed young fellow with a spotty face, who, none the less, made great boasts of his conquests among the fair, "I always thought your name was John."

"FitzHugh Vespasian Smith," giggled the third—the youngest and pertest of the trio. "My heye, what a go !"

John plunged in among them, without more ado, and snatched the envelope away ; and the opportune arrival of the managing clerk sent them all scuttling to their places, and brought their banter to a close.

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"Smith," said Mr. Boroughgate, as he passed through to his own sanctum, "I have some important letters that I must get off at once. Bring your book, please."

There was nothing for John to do but to thrust his own missive into his pocket, with one more hasty glance at the address — "FitzHugh Vespasian Smith, Esq. Private and confidential"—and to follow his superior, note-book in hand. For the next hour he was fully occupied in taking shorthand notes from Mr. Boroughgate's rapid dictation; and as the managing clerk was occasionally rather incoherent as well as rapid, and was deeply annoyed by being asked to repeat himself, John's faculties were kept well on the stretch. And meanwhile, the mysterious envelope seemed to burn right into his flesh.

"Get those letters out immediately, Smith, and let me have them for signature," were Mr. Boroughgate's directions, as John returned to his room. His desk was close beside that of the cross-eyed young fellow — Starkins by name; and what with his sharp glances of inquiry, shot from time to time from the columns of figures upon which he was engaged, and the rush-orders which kept John himself steadily upon his correspondence, the morning went by without any chance presenting itself for an examination of the envelope or its contents.

"How is she, Smith?" or, "Did she send any message to me?" or, "I say, Fitzzy, is that pet-name of yours her own invention?" these are samples of the questions with which John was everlastingly plied by his neighbour, who, for the rest, seemed to be but

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little disturbed by the "Shut up, you donkey, I can't get out these notes if you keep nagging in that absurd way!" which he ordinarily received by way of answer.

Once during the morning the pert young fellow came in from the "governor's" room to bring Starkins another bundle of accounts, and, of course, he had to put in his oar.

"I say, Clarence FitzWheezlem, old Jasper wants to know"—"old Jasper" was colloquial for the head of the firm—"whether there's a good rent-roll attached to the dookdom, and how soon you are intending to deprive him of your valuable services?"

John's pen went faster than ever.

"Don't bother him, Paxton," said Starkins, throwing much sympathy into his tones. "He ain't feeling well this morning. You know, a letter like that will upset any man."

"Oh, she'll come round, right enough," Paxton went on. "Give her time, Clarence, my boy; give her time. Eh, Starkins? Starkins knows the sex, Clarence, and he'll put you up to a thing or two. Only, I say—don't leave old Jasper's name out of the wedding invitations. He'd be awfully hurt, you know. He was askin' me only just now when you expected it to come off."

As this kind of thing went on through the entire morning, John, by lunch-time, was in a state of nervous irritability bordering on distraction.

At length half-past twelve came, and he was able to escape. He did not go straight to the restaurant where he was accustomed to get his mid-day chop or

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cut from the joint. He hurried off, instead, to a secluded spot in the shadow of one of the big warehouses not far away; and there, after satisfying himself that he was safe from inspection, he drew the letter from his pocket.

Yes, there was the address, written in a small and exceedingly delicate feminine hand: "FitzHugh Vespasian Smith, Esq. Private and Confidential." The inscription danced so bewilderingly before his eyes that he had some difficulty in reading it. Nothing else was on the envelope—no further direction, and no postage stamp. Evidently, then, the missive had been brought to the office personally or by messenger. John's heart gave a great thump. Could she have left it there herself? For somehow he knew that the writer was Victorine.

He turned so sick that for a moment or two he could not make up his mind to break the envelope open. When he did so, it was with trembling fingers that he drew forth a small sheet of daintily perfumed paper. And this is what he read:

"FitzHugh Vespasian Smith, Esq.

"SIR,—This is to give you warning that you are recognised and known. From this time forward, all your movements will be watched. Take care. Your safety lies in keeping out of our way. If you endeavour to meddle with our plans, you must take the consequences. I need not particularise. Perhaps you may remember how Penny Whistle disappeared mysteriously six months ago, and has

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not been heard of since. No one wants to disappear mysteriously if he can help it. Look out !”

That was all, and the epistle contained neither address, date, nor signature. But that was quite enough. Starkins had been well within the mark when he had jestingly said: “You know a letter like that will upset any man.”

It certainly upset John Smith. When, obeying his reason rather than his desire, he turned into his restaurant for a little lunch, the buxom damsel who had attended to his gastronomic needs every day these three years was positively startled, as she took his order, at the sight of his haggard face; and as she watched him stagger out of the dining-room, leaving his succulent bit of roast mutton and boiled potato all but untasted, she confided to the Hebe of the adjoining table that she knew “poor Mr. Smith was goin’ to be ill—he looked that awful !”

And, indeed, the letter contained that which might well have set a-flutter a stouter heart than poor Mr. Smith’s. I should like myself to be considered as plucky as most men of my size; but I confess to a feeling that such dark hints and covert warnings would go far to disturb even my wonted equanimity. No one, indeed, as our friend’s laconic correspondent suggested, wants to disappear mysteriously if he can help it; and the mere possibility of doing so is distinctly unpleasant, not to say alarming. John had not the remotest idea of the identity of the Penny Whistle alluded to in

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the document ; but it was only too evident from the context that, whoever or whatever he might be, he had been guilty of doing precisely what John himself was delicately advised not to do—meddling with somebody's plans—and that his mysterious disappearance had been compassed in consequence. John was suddenly filled with the keenest interest in the untoward fate of Penny Whistle ! Mysterious disappearance was manifestly only a euphemism—if, indeed, it could be styled a euphemism ; perhaps brutal synonym would be more correct—for assassination, or—it had to come out—direct and simple murder. And for a respectable young man who had hitherto known absolutely nothing of bad company, and whose only acquaintance with deeds of violence had been through the medium of novels, to find himself threatened with murder—this, indeed, was something to turn his stomach against roast mutton and boiled potatoes, and to bring a cold perspiration to his brow. John's mind was instantly filled with a vision of becoming the hero, not of a delightful and well-ordered love-romance, but of a coroner's inquest and a number of sensational paragraphs in the newspapers ; and among all the happenings he had contemplated even in his most extravagant moods, it is safe to say that the chance of being "sat upon" had never entered his thoughts.

When, after recovering from the first shock, he began to consider the contents of the letter a little carefully, he found himself completely baffled. Study it as he would, he could make neither head nor tail

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of it. Could such an epistle conceivably have emanated from Victorine? Horrible as the inference was, it was one not to be avoided. The handwriting was a woman's; it answered exactly, as he was forced to admit, in its combined delicacy and freedom, to what he knew of her personality and character. He could think of no other woman who would have written to him at all; and certainly she was the only individual, male or female, so far as he was aware—and how he cursed his folly!—to whom he was known under his idiotic romantic *alias*, in place of simple John. But would Victorine ever have addressed him with warnings and threats? Could such a girl sit down and write, in that perfectly monstrous and cold-blooded way, of assassination? How vividly he remembered every detail of their walk from Portland Road Station that evening, which now seemed, oh, so many years ago; her half-childish chatter, her bright face and innocent laughter; the frank kindness with which she had parted from him; the thanks she had given him for his behaviour towards her. Why, to connect her, even remotely, with these sanguinary menaces was not only frightful, it was downright absurd. And yet—did he not also recall these odd utterances of hers that same night, and the almost pleading manner in which she had told him to forget her as quickly and as completely as possible! “You have absolutely no business with a girl like me—I am what I am, and what you would never, never understand!” These had been her very words—the tone in which she had uttered them, the strange emphasis she had laid

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upon them, still lingered in his ears. And somehow, when he dwelt on these words, that tone, that emphasis, the idea of connecting Victorine with the letter, gruesome as it was, did not, after all, appear quite so furiously ridiculous. Good heavens! what did it all mean?

But supposing the letter had come from her, John was still as far as ever from understanding, or even guessing at, its purpose and significance. Whoever the writer was, she had written on behalf of others as well as of herself. She had told him that he was recognised; that his movements would henceforth be followed; that his only safety lay in keeping out of the way of herself and her friends; that swift and certain retribution of the most terrible character would follow if he persisted in meddling with their plans. Now, where in the devil's name was he to look for the explanation of all this wild nonsense? That the friends, on behalf of whom his correspondent had spoken, were none other than the men whom he had come to associate with Victorine, whose attention, for some reason or other, he had unwillingly attracted, and by one of whom he had recently been followed, did not admit of doubt; but what were their plans? And how in the world had he been meddling with them? How had he indicated the slightest desire of so doing? There was the puzzle! John put his brain upon the rack, but all he could extort from it was a suggestion that there was some love question at the bottom of the trouble. Someone—perhaps, as he now began to fancy, from the conspicuous part that

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individual had lately been playing in his life, the ferocious young man with the goggle-glasses—was on the point of marrying Victorine, and scented in him—John Smith—(as possibly he had found before in poor Penny Whistle) a dangerous rival. The idea flattered his pride, or would, under other circumstances, have done so ; but otherwise it could hardly be regarded as satisfactory. For, to say the least of it, it was odd that Victorine should have written about such a matter, instead of leaving her *prétendu* to air his own jealousies. And, on the chance of possible rivalry—though a duel might have been strictly in order—all this talk about mysterious disappearances was surely a trifle uncalled for.

On his return to the office, John at once got hold of the red-headed messenger boy, and on some trivial pretext, took him aside.

“Mason,” he said, “I want to ask you a question.” The boy’s face crinkled in all directions under the influence of suppressed mirth. “Don’t be a fool, but listen to me a minute! How did that letter get on my desk this morning?”

“Wot letter?” grinned Mason (otherwise Carrots), whose wit always took the form of exasperation.

“Why, the letter that was lying on my desk when I came in.” John knew the youth of old, and resisted a strong temptation to twitch a lock of his flaming hair.

“Oh, *that* letter! I put that there.”

“Of course you did! But how did you come by it? Who gave it to you? Look here, Mason. That letter is really not of the least importance. It

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came from—from some friends of mine who—who—well, who sent it to me just as a joke—see! But I want to know all about it, just the same, and if you tell me a straight story, I don't mind giving you half-a-crown."

John produced a two-and-sixpenny piece from his pocket, and balanced it thoughtfully on his fingertips. Just how much or how little of his own explanative statement found acceptance with Carrots—who, like most members of his profession, was preternaturally wise in the wisdom of the world—he did not bother to inquire. He saw by the look in the boy's greenish eyes that the proffered bribe had made the required impression.

"Well," said Carrots, with a deliberation which was intended to indicate complete veracity, "wen I got 'ere this morning, I saw a bloke 'angin' about the front door, as if he was waiting for somebody. At fust I didn't take no notice of 'im—"

"What sort of a man was he?"

"He was so wrapped up in a big overcoat and a great big 'at that I couldn't tell exactly what he looked like. But he was quite a tall, 'eavy chap, with a red beard, and he spoke like a furrener."

"Ah!" exclaimed John involuntarily. Mason's meagre description left no doubt in his mind as to the man's identity. He was the "other one."

"I was just a-goin' in," Carrots continued, "wen the bloke spotted me, and came up so sudden that he quite took my breath away. 'Do you belong in there?' says he. He spoke quite fierce. 'Wot if I do?' says I. 'Are you in the employ of Werry &

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Co.?' says he. 'S'posin' I am,' says I, 'I don't see any 'arm in that,' says I. 'Well,' says he, 'do you know a party of the name of Smith?' And he looked at me sharp. My! but he has a pair of black heyes in his 'ead!" The narrator added dramatic force to his story at this point by making a gesture to simulate the boring of a gimlet through a board. "'P'raps I do, and p'raps I don't,' says I; 'may I ast wot you want with 'im?' 'Give 'im that,' says he, and he 'anded me the letter. 'And mind,' says he, speakin' quite fierce," and here Carrots sank his voice to a quite preternatural bass—" 'mind he gets it, for it's very partikler,' says he; 'and I tell you wot, youngster, if he don't get it, it'll be so much the worse for you.'"

"Well?" said John, to whom it will be readily understood every detail of this recital had its interest.

"So I took the letter," Mason went on, "and the bloke was just a-goin' away, when I called to him to stop. 'Ere,' says I, 'there's some mistake about this.' 'Wot mistake?' says he, glowerin'. 'There ain't no one of this name in Werry & Co.'s,' says I, lookin' at the address. 'You told me you knew Mr. Smith,' says he. 'So I do,' says I, answerin' up, 'but our Mr. Smith ain't got no rigmarole like that afore his name'—and I read out the Clarence Wot-d'ye-call-'em—you know."

"Yes, yes," said John rapidly; "that was part of the joke."

"Well, the bloke didn't seem to think it much of a joke himself," said Carrots. "He glared at me as if he had 'arf a mind to eat me—the hogre. 'Wot do

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you mean?' says he. 'Only,' says I, 'that our Mr. Smith is just John—plain John Smith,' says I, 'and nothink else.' This seemed to knock the wind out of him for a minute. 'Are you sure?' says he. 'Cock!' says I. Then he pulled 'ard at his beard"—the speaker illustrated the action—"and after a while he says, 'Wot is your Mr. Smith like?' says he. 'Oh,' says I, 'he's just like any ordinary gentleman.' Then he described you exactly—your eyes, and 'air, and clothes, and walk, and everythink; and says he, 'Is that your Mr. Smith?' 'If it ain't,' says I, 'then it's his twin brother.' For wot he said 'it you awf as if he'd known you from the cradle." Such accuracy of portrayal gave John a most uncomfortable feeling. "'Then,' says he, 'no matter about the name; that ain't nothink. The letter's meant for your Mr. Smith, wotever he chooses to call himself; and I daresay,' says he, 'that he calls himself a variety of things. So see that he gets it, youngster, at once.' And with that he went away, without as much as a 'Thank you.'"

John plied his informant with a number of questions touching points in the story, but elicited no further particulars of any importance. So he handed over the half-crown, which Carrots playfully made feint to spit on, for luck, spun in the air, and confided to one of his countless pockets. Then John went back to his desk, to spend so much of the afternoon as he could spare from his work in thinking over Mason's account, and its possible bearings upon the problems presented by the letter itself, without, however, deriving much light or comfort from his meditations.

CHAPTER X

SHOWING HOW JOHN, HAVING HAD ENOUGH OF ROMANCE, IS INVITED TO TRY A LITTLE MORE

SINCE that Sunday afternoon, now a number of weeks ago, when John had overturned the tobacco-jar, and otherwise behaved so unaccountably, Ben Chadwick had seen comparatively little of his friend; but that little, combined with what he had heard from common acquaintances in a roundabout way, had sufficed to deepen his conviction that, somehow or other, something was radically wrong. Being himself of a practical turn of mind, and limited outlook upon life, Ben oscillated, in search of some sufficient cause for such serious disturbance, between liver and love. His own temperament had naturally inclined him towards the former line of explanation, but what he knew of John's romantic vagaries made the latter and more disquieting supposition fill an increasingly large place in his mind.

"I think I must drop round and see the poor old chap," he said to himself one evening, after the somewhat nondescript meal which awaited him on his return from the city.

Having partaken heartily of some of his favourite viands, and washed them down with a bottle of Bass,

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he felt himself in a glow of satisfaction and sympathy. And drop round he accordingly did.

He found John ensconced by the parlour fire, his slippered feet on the fender, a copy of the *Echo* on his knees. A pipe, and an unopened packet of honey-dew, lay on the corner of the table near by; for since his indisposition, it had been amicably settled between his mother and himself that he might smoke downstairs if he chose to; an understanding of which, however—judging from the absence of any smell of tobacco in the room—he had apparently, on that particular evening, not seen fit to take advantage. Ben noted this circumstance, and drew some alarming influences therefrom. As for Mrs. Smith, she was seated in her usual place at the table, with the usual litter of needlework in evidence beside her. It is rather astonishing, when one comes to think about it, what an enormous amount of darning and mending ladies of Mrs. Smith's type always find to do. They never read, they never sit idle. When the severer household tasks of the day—the scrubbing, the dusting, the cooking—are over, they invariably and instinctively sit down to sew.

The ordinary salutations done with, Ben took the large chair indicated to him on the side of the fire-place opposite to John.

"Glad to see you looking so much better, old man," he said, in his cheery way.

His private opinion was that John was really looking nothing of the kind, but seemed wretchedly ill and depressed. It was not his habit, however, to lead off by giving a man so unconsoling a view of his case.

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"Oh, yes, I'm all right," John replied glumly. Why was it that everybody would persist in talking about his health?

But here Mrs. Smith chimed in.

"That's all nonsense!" she said emphatically. "John is *not* all right, Mr. Chadwick. I don't know what's the matter with him, but he worries me more than I can say."

Ben's fat, unintelligent face assumed an expression of genuine sympathy.

"Cod-liver oil is a good thing," he suggested, with his head tilted a little, at an owl-like angle of wisdom, to one side.

"Rot!" muttered John.

"I have tried to get him to take that, Mr. Chadwick," said the solicitous mother. "I have given him medicine—"

"Yes, you've dosed me with all sorts of stuff," interrupted her son, testily enough. "When I'm a bit off my base," he explained, "mother thinks I want quarts of physic. I don't want physic. I want to be left alone."

Mrs. Smith turned upon Mr. Chadwick a look eloquent of uncertainty and alarm, and Ben responded with a glance which was as full of emotional meaning as his chubby features would allow. But John's words and tone made it perfectly clear that any further discussion of his health would lead to something perilously like a quarrel. So that delicate subject was forthwith dropped.

Nothing could well have been flatter and less entertaining than the discursive conversation which followed. John hardly stirred himself to speak,

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merely answering direct questions with a monosyllable or a curt phrase, and obstinately refusing Ben's lead into even the most promising topics. Mrs. Smith did her best to be agreeable, but she was clearly preoccupied, and never once laid aside her sewing, except to go through the necessary operation of threading her needle. Thus the burden of the talk devolved upon Ben, who for a time struggled manfully to keep the ball going, but whose energy and resources gradually gave out under the stress of such adverse conditions. He experimented alternately upon questions of private and public interest, but not even by his spirited account of the sudden and quite unexpected marriage of Sarah Sneddon, a prominent young lady in the choir of the "Little Bethel" which Mrs. Smith attended for "worship"; not even by his detailed description of the alleged aims and methods of a set of eccentrics belonging to some secret society, who (according to the evening paper) had been discovered in London, in active search for the Elixir of Life and the Philosopher's Stone; not even by such exciting themes as these was he able to take the chill off the social atmosphere. Altogether, he spent a most dismal and depressing hour, the lugubriousness of which was considerably intensified by the fact that John was so entirely oblivious of his duties as host that he never did so much as dimly hint at the possibilities of a pipe; and he was just about to give the whole business up as a bad job, and—with a heavy sense of duty done—to take his farewell, when Mrs. Smith herself rose, and began to gather up her work.

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"I'll bid you good-night, Mr. Chadwick," she said. "It's early yet; but I've had a big day's house-cleaning, and want to get to bed. You and John, I daresay, will be glad to have a bit of talk—only don't be too late, John, will you? And, by the way, I'll leave the bread and cheese out on the kitchen-table, in case Mr. Chadwick would like a crust before he goes."

And so the good mother—who had *not* a particularly long day of housekeeping, and did *not* specially want to go to bed—excused herself to get out of the way, that she might leave the two young men together. She felt and hoped that Ben might succeed in cheering John up. Her son's strange nervousness, his constant abstraction, his fitful starts, and the gloom which seemed always to rest upon his mind, were now causing her the most serious alarm. And the worst aspect of the matter was that, for the first time in her experience, she felt herself absolutely powerless to do anything with him or for him.

As soon as she had gone upstairs, John made a couple of trips to the kitchen, and brought thence the loaf and cheese, together with knives, plates, a bottle of whisky, a couple of glasses, and a jug of water. These elements of a repast he placed in silence at Ben's end of the table.

"Help yourself," he said; "I don't want anything to eat."

By way of answer, Ben poured out some whisky, filled the glass with water, and pushed the beverage towards his friend.

"You ain't going to let a chap drink by himself, though," he remarked, in a tone of reproof.

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John so far relented as to acknowledge a willingness to join in that rite of hospitality which is, by an odd convention, supposed to be particularly symbolical of good fellowship.

Then Ben himself proceeded to do ample justice to the more solid part of the supper ; after which he pushed his plate aside, and mixed himself a second glass of grog.

"I'll smoke a bit, old man, if you don't mind," he said, drawing from his pocket a stumpy briar pipe, which gave every sign of having seen good service.

John threw over the unopened packet of honeydew; and Ben filled, lighted, puffed, and settled himself comfortably in his chair. Then he cleared his throat. He had made up his mind that the duty of friendship demanded that he should "pump" John, and now the opportunity had come. But duty has an unpleasant way of assuming a distinctly repellant appearance when one gets close up to it; and Ben admitted to himself that he did not like the job.

"John," he said, after a few minutes of silence, which his companion did not exhibit the slightest signs of breaking, "John, old man, there's something the matter with you, and I want you to tell me what it is."

He fired off his remark at a venture, and no one could well have been more surprised than he was at its instantaneous effect. The case was one in which his own bluntness of speech served the purpose he had in view far better than any diplomatic soundings or delicacy of tact might have done. Had he approached his subject in the elaborately ingenious,

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circuitous way, which would, doubtless, have commended itself to a more subtle mind than his, John, put on his guard, would most probably have resisted his advance inch by inch. But under such a sudden and direct appeal, the poor fellow's feelings, long pent up, gave way entirely. The unheroic young man had for so many weeks lived and brooded within himself that he had come to crave sympathy, counsel, comfort, or at least someone to talk to frankly and unreservedly. And the result was that, on the spur of the moment, he capitulated before he had given himself time to consider the wisdom or unwisdom of his course.

"Ben," he said hoarsely, "I am the most miserable man alive!"

Mr. Chadwick took his pipe out of his mouth, and for a moment or two stared across at his friend in speechless bewilderment. There was no mistaking the concentrated passion of John's tones.

"Heavens!" he said at last, "has anything happened?" He did not realise that in formulating his question in this way, he was making ironical use of a phrase which had played a considerable part in his many discussions with John over the latter's romantic aspirations.

"Has anything happened!" said John, almost fiercely. "Good God! I should think that something has happened!" He stepped across to the door, and satisfied himself that it was securely fastened. Then he went to Ben's side, and leaning over him, dropped his voice to a whisper. "Ben, don't think I'm fooling. I'm a doomed man!"

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The complete blankness of Ben's stare would baffle description. Again he took his pipe from his mouth ; his eyes were riveted on his companion's face in absolute amazement, and he breathed hard.

"It's truth—gospel truth!" John went on. "For aught I know, I may be shot any day—or—or—chucked into the river—or—or—done away with somehow. They're after me! I saw them again yesterday, and to-day. This evening one of them was hanging about the street corner when I left the office. Ben! Ben! if I shouldn't come home one night—if I shouldn't turn up again—if—if the police get hold of the thing, and there's an inquest, and—and you know, Ben! I say, Ben—you'll tell mother, won't you, that there really wasn't any harm in it. I swear to God I never hurt the girl! Why, good heavens!"—here John spluttered in the most unheroic manner—"I never had the chance. I only saw her once. What the devil they want to murder me for, I don't know—I can't even guess!"

Ben's first impression, as he listened to this tirade, was that John had gone mad—out and out mad ; and he drew the rapid inference that much reading of romance and brooding over his sterile lot had ended by turning his brain. But he realised the next moment that, however flighty and extravagant his friend's talk might be, there must certainly be some substantial basis for his trouble.

"John," he said slowly, "I haven't the wildest notion of what you are talking about. Fellows don't go about in these days with the idea of murdering other fellows. If you've been fooling about with

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another chap's gal, I daresay he'll try to punch your head for it; and after all, you couldn't blame him, could you?" Ben stated this part of the case with the admirable coolness of a scientific observer of life. "But as for murdering, and that sort of thing, you know—why, that's all rot, you know."

John groaned aloud.

"You don't understand anything about it," he said.

"I never contradict a gentleman unless it's absolutely necessary," Ben replied. "S'posing you explain exactly what's up. Who *is* the gal that all the fuss is about? and what sort of a chap is it that wants to chuck you into the river? Come, begin at the beginning, John, and tell me all about it."

Ben lighted another pipe, and once more settled himself to listen; but his pipe went out and was forgotten, and all considerations of ease were set at naught, long before his friend came to the close of his narrative. For John did begin at the beginning—at that first memorable meeting with Victoriné in the underground railway train, and made a full and detailed confession of his troubles, pursuing his story with relentless veracity and minuteness down to the time when the receipt of the anonymous letter, with its warnings and menaces, brought him the assurance that his visions of coming evil were not unfounded, but that, by some method or other, he had succeeded in arousing the bitter hostility of at least a couple of exceedingly bloodthirsty and reckless men. At first, it is true, his summary of facts and conclusions lacked somewhat in orderliness and lucidity. But Ben did

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not scruple to stop him short from time to time in his over-fluent and zigzag recital, to ply him with questions, and confront him with objections; with the result that out of poor John's confused mass of incidents and guesses, he managed at length to construct a pretty clear record of what had actually taken place.

"And did you say just now," he inquired, "that since you got that letter you have reason to believe that these fellows are after you again."

"I know they are," answered John emphatically. "One of them—the young man with the goggles—was watching for me when I left the office at six o'clock this evening. He was standing at the corner, out of the light of the lamp. I didn't see him—at least, I didn't recognise him—till I was close up against him."

"And then?"

"And then—why, then, of course, I crossed the street, and—"

"Yes?"

"And when I looked round, he had disappeared."

"H'm! Have you got that letter handy, John?"

John had the letter quite handy—safely deposited in the inner pocket of his waistcoat. He passed it to Ben, who perused it slowly and critically. When he had finished it, he turned back to the beginning, and perused it slowly and critically again.

"Well, that beats anything *I* ever saw!" was his curt commentary, as he folded the document and returned it to its unhappy owner, who meanwhile had been watching him with big, anxious eyes.

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"John, my boy, you've got yourself into a pretty mess this time, with all your tomfoolery about romance, and that sort of thing—a pretty mess, indeed! Unless"—with a sudden flash of inspiration—"unless the whole beastly thing is nothing but a practical joke!"

"You don't think it *is* a joke, do you, then?" cried John, clutching fiercely at this new idea.

"No, I don't," answered Ben bluntly. "That was merely a notion that struck me. There can't be any joke about it—you may bank on that. Who in the world would take the trouble to cook up all this nonsense just for fun? Whatever it is, it's serious enough. You're likely to get your damned fill of romance for once, my boy."

Ben had been cruel enough to give his friend a momentary glimpse of hope, and to snatch away the light in an instant, leaving the darkness deeper than before. He was singularly brutal, too, in his judgment, having evidently in his own mind struck up a causal relationship between John's long-cherished heroic aspirations and the pickle into which he had got. This notion naturally irritated Mr. Chadwick, and made him unusually harsh and unsympathetic. John, it is true, found a certain ease of mind in having taken Ben into his confidence; but, on the other hand, matters were made rather worse than better by the serious view which, now that the whole case was before him, his phlegmatic friend evidently took of the situation. He had started out, in his ignorance, by pooh-poohing the very idea of murder; but since he had heard the entire story, and

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had read the letter, that idea no longer seemed to strike him as so grotesque and outrageous.

"Ben," he said hoarsely, "never mind about that damned romance. I've been an awful fool, I know. You needn't rub that into me, old man. Tell me at least what you think is the matter. Why do these fellows dog my footsteps? Why do they write me that I am recognised—that I must keep out of their way—that if I don't look alive they'll treat me—good Lord! they'll treat me as they did Penny Whistle? Who the devil was Penny Whistle, and what has he to do with me? Why can't they let me alone? What have I done to hurt them?"

"Well," said Ben deliberately, "I only see one explanation of the difficulty myself. It's the gal. For some reason or other, they think you're after her, and they're determined to stop you. Perhaps they fancy you want to carry her off. At any rate, it's the gal—you may take my word for that. You tell me yourself you've been dangling about Bloomsbury, night after night, in the hope of finding her. They got to know that, you may depend upon it, and there you are."

"But still I don't understand their behaviour," said John. "Of course, somehow or other, Victorine is at the bottom of the trouble—at least, I mean—" he broke off suddenly, and after a moment made a fresh start. "But even supposing they don't want me to have anything to do with her, don't you think they go to work—well, in a mighty odd kind of way? Couldn't they come and tell me that she's married, or engaged, or whatever it is? Why do they spy on

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me, and threaten me with murder?—*that's* what I don't understand."

"John," said Ben, "didn't you say these fellows were foreigners?"

"I have every reason to believe they are," was the reply.

"Well, there's the whole thing in a nutshell. Foreigners ain't like Englishmen, and don't behave as such. Take an Englishman, now. If you go fooling about after his gal, he'll either take no notice or will give you a bit of his mind on the subject, and perhaps will make his ideas on the subject clearer—supposing you persist in your attentions, don't you know—by punching your head into the bargain. But it'll be all square and above board, and a little punching doesn't do any harm. But that ain't a foreigner's way. There's never anything square and above board about him. He sets his teeth, and curses, and plays the sneak generally. And instead of having it out with you like a man, he just hangs about and waits his chance, and one dark night, when you're not thinking anything about him, he comes up behind you on tiptoe with a pistol or a knife, and—"

"Yes, yes," interrupted John hurriedly, "I see the difference. I daresay you're right there—if these fellows are foreigners, that explains it all. But here's the real question. A man doesn't like to go about fancying that somebody means to kill him."

"It is unpleasant," Ben conceded.

"And so, what's to be done, Ben?"

"Done?" Ben exclaimed. "Well, I'm hanged if, in your place, I wouldn't try a little head-punching

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on my own account. The next time you meet one of these fire-eating Italians, or whatever they are, just go up to him, with a polite 'Good morning, mounseer,' by way of introduction, and then invite him to smell a bit of real English fist. Make him see a few dozen stars, my boy—real beauties! That's the ticket! I wouldn't mind betting a pony or two that he'd melt away pretty quick." Ben actually laughed outright as he pictured the capital scene: John triumphant, and the discomfited Italian picking himself up and rubbing his nose. "That's just like them foreigners. You'd be astonished to see what cowards they are. They're all right behind a man's back; but when it's face to face, on fair ground—yah!"

But John shook his head dubiously. Ben's bellicose advice did not at all fit in with his present completely unmilitant mood. His politics were now of the "peace at any price" complexion.

"It won't do, Ben," he said, "it won't do! You know I never was anything with the knuckles. Besides, it's ten chances to one that he'd have a knife or a revolver in his pocket, and then—"

"Oh, well," said Ben, "if you don't like that way out of it—mind you, I think that's the proper method of dealing with such chaps myself—but if you don't like that way, there's only one other that I can see open to you: you must do as they tell you—you must keep out of their road—"

"I *am* keeping out of their road," groaned John. "It's they who are getting into mine."

"You must keep out of their road," Ben went on,

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paying no attention to the interruption ; “ you must have absolutely nothing to do with that gal—absolutely nothing, mind ! And from all I can make out, she must be a pretty tough case—”

“ I am sure that, so far as Victorine is concerned—”

“ Don’t think another thing about her—avoid her like poison ; just go on as you always did before you knew of her existence ; and then, if these blackguards give you any more trouble—”

“ Well ? ”

“ Just go straight to the police, and put the whole affair into their hands.”

“ I never thought of that,” John said, very slowly, foreseeing all sorts of scandal. He began to fancy that even head punching might have its advantages.

“ You never thought of it ? Why didn’t you ever think of it ? ” said the practical Ben. “ Look here, John, we ain’t living in one of your bloomin’ novels, nor, thank the pigs, in Italy, or—or Texas. We’re living in England. And in England a fellow pays rates and taxes, and has a right to police protection. In the streets of London a man can’t go about picking off the people he doesn’t like with a revolver, or sticking a bowie-knife between their shoulders as he might do in—in thingumbob. You pay your taxes ; you’re a free and independent citizen. And if a couple of blasted foreigners come prowling about after you at night, and write you damned impudent letters about mysterious disappearances, and that sort of thing—well, just you go and make a clean breast of it at the nearest police-station. Those blooming unshaved villains would look a trifle silly if they were

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bound over to keep the peace for six months, or marched off to prison. If you don't want to pitch into them yourself, introduce them to an English magistrate, and let him deal with them. He'll take the spots off them for you—trust him for that."

With this Ben rose, serene in patriotic pride, and made ready to depart.

"Your mother would never forgive me, John, if I kept you sitting up any longer. By George! it's well on towards twelve already. Who'd have thought it? How the time does fly when one is in cheerful society! Well, good-night, old fellow! Just you go to bed and think over my advice, and I fancy by morning you'll have come to the conclusion that it is marked by my usual sound common sense. Don't forget that this ain't a novel, John, or a play over at the Surrey. It's dead earnest, and if those fellows annoy you any more, just let the police into the secret, and that'll soon settle them. Understand?"

"I certainly will think over what you say," John replied. "Good-bye! Drop round soon."

He saw Ben out into the raw, gusty night; bolted the door, put out the gas, and crept up to bed, in the hope that his mother was long since fast asleep. And it really was with a lighter heart than he had carried about with him for several weeks past that he went down to breakfast the next morning. For what Ben Chadwick had said, when thought over quietly and carefully, was found to contain more comfort than he had at first anticipated. After all, why should he worry so much? Ben was perfectly right! He, John Smith, was not, he was thankful to say—

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yes, he actually admitted that he was thankful to say it—an inhabitant of the far-off No Man's Land of his favourite novelists and playwrights, where all sorts of sanguinary things constantly happened, and men even went about to shoot one another upon the slightest provocation, or none. He lived in the steady-going, humdrum world of London, where, if foreign swashbucklers did venture to try any of their desperado tricks, recourse could always be had to the eminently prosaic but really rather satisfactory machinery of the law. He had been foolish to take the affair so seriously. That came of living too much with himself, and brooding over everything in such an idiotic way. Hang those foreigners! Ben was really a very good chap. He had the faculty of putting questions into such a sensible light. He soon saw the absurdity—

His airy meditations came to an abrupt close; for there, on his desk, lay a delicate blue envelope, addressed, "FitzHugh Vespasian Smith, Esq.—*Private*," in the little dainty feminine hand he remembered only too well. He stood for a moment transfixed, and then slowly picked up the note, and turned it over in gingerly fashion, as though he had some expectation of its exploding in his hands. Fortunately, he was alone; for neither Starkins nor Paxton had as yet put in an appearance, while Carrots, as he could hear, was busy making up Mr. Boroughgate's fire in the adjoining room. He seized his opportunity, and broke open the letter, fully expecting a repetition of the familiar upbraidings and threats, with, perhaps, some specific indications of

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the date on which, and the method by which, his "disappearance" was to be brought about. But this is what he read :

"MY DEAR MR. SMITH,—If you have not altogether forgotten me—though I don't for a moment imagine that your recollection of our one pleasant meeting can be half as lively as mine is of your kindness and courtesy on that occasion—you may, perhaps, be willing to listen to something of some importance that I want to tell you. If so, will you be good enough to meet me in the first-class waiting-room of Charing Cross Station on Monday evening next, at nine o'clock? *I shall be alone.*—
Most sincerely yours, "VICTORINE.

"P.S.—Don't worry a bit about the ridiculous behaviour of my friends. There has been a stupid mistake. I will explain all, and we will have a good laugh over it together."

CHAPTER XI

IN WHICH JOHN SMITH ASTONISHES HIMSELF—
AND PERHAPS THE READER

TO say that John Smith was surprised by the perusal of this missive would be to put the matter mildly. As Mr. Chadwick might have phrased it for us, he had all the wind completely knocked out of him.

What, in the name of good or ill fortune, could be the explanation of the fresh turn which things had suddenly taken? For that things had taken a fresh turn, and a most extraordinary one—that for some reason, not even to be guessed at, the whole attitude of Victorine and her friends towards him had undergone a complete change—did not seem at the moment of first reading to admit of doubt. It was still only a few days ago that he had received a letter, even now safely buttoned up in the inner pocket of his waistcoat, in which, without any unnecessary mincing of language, he had been warned to look well to his behaviour, or take the consequences—the consequences being his own mysterious and immediate disappearance. And now that abusive and minatory document had been followed up by the most gracious and friendly of notes, indited in what (for there had been no attempt made to disguise

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it) was manifestly the same handwriting; and he was invited in the pleasantest fashion to a private and confidential interview with a young woman who, not a week ago, had been the medium of transmission of the direst threats upon his life. Nor was this all. Instead of apologising for such threats—instead either of treating them with the seriousness which they surely deserved, or of showing the slightest disposition to ignore them as too painful for discussion, his correspondent just alluded to them with a light and airy kind of non-chalance, as if, after all, they might be properly regarded as rather a good joke. What tortures had he not endured for days and nights which had been the most miserable of his life! How had he not trodden even the busy city streets in dread of unseen danger! How, even at high noon, had he not trembled in glancing furtively up by-alleys and round suggestive corners! How, night after night had he not tossed feverishly upon his hot pillow; his occasional snatches of sleep being haunted by monstrous dreams of terror which still made his flesh creep and his blood run cold, when he was jolted back to consciousness again! And now he was told—and in a postscript, look you! as if the whole business came as a sort of after-thought—that he was not to “worry a bit” about the “ridiculous behaviour” of Victorine’s friends, who had laboured, it would appear, under some “stupid mistake” over which, when the matter was once made clear to him, John himself would be expected to go into spasms of laughter. Well, points of view differ, and there

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are all kinds of ways of describing the same occurrence ; and thus, while Victorine might see fit to speak of threatening letters and premeditated murder as "ridiculous," "ridiculous" was hardly the adjective which John, for his part, would have chosen as the most appropriate. He could not help asking himself whether, supposing his "mysterious disappearance" had actually been effected, that, too, would have been classed as "ridiculous," and quietly dismissed as nothing beyond the somewhat comical result of a "stupid mistake." There was something oddly and uncomfortably inadequate about such language ; especially as, in the event of the stupidity of the mistake not having been discovered in time, he—John—would probably not have been in a position to join with Victorine in a "good laugh" over its deliciously humorous effects. Would Victorine then have enjoyed the "good laugh" all to herself, he wondered. Perhaps the situation might, in that case, have seemed to her even more irresistibly funny ! There is no accounting for tastes in jokes, and as someone has sagely remarked, any difference of opinion in such delicate matters is apt to strain even the closest friendship.

Victorine's second letter reached John on Friday morning, and the appointment proposed by her was, as we remember, for Monday night. This left practically four days open in which the young man might add doubt to doubt and puzzle to puzzle, and brood himself to the verge of lunacy over the bewildering results. Of course, he read the few lines of the note again and again, with the earnest-

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ness and fixed attention of a scholiast intent upon wringing the innermost meaning from even the simplest and most fugitive chance word of his favourite author. And equally, of course, in spite of all his study, or as a result of it, his judgment continued to see-saw in perpetual uncertainty and misgiving. Little by little, however, with every reperusal, his mind, prone in its tensivity of excitement to take alarm at the smallest provocation, began to veer round to a line of interpretation diametrically opposed to that with which he had set out. At the start, he was, as we have seen, struck with astonishment at the fresh turn which, as it then seemed to him, things had suddenly taken. Superficially considered, Victorine's epistle was like the declaration of a complete change of front, and an invitation to him to regard the past and its unpleasantness—its "ridiculous" happenings and "stupid mistakes"—as over and done with. But could he venture to take this hasty and shallow view of the subject as final? Certainly not, he now told himself. Would it not be, indeed, the height and depth of folly to do so? He realised at once, when he came to think about the matter quietly, how completely his first opinion jumped with his dearest wishes. Here, at last, after weeks of weary waiting and fruitless effort, the chance seemed to have come to him for which, since that walk from Portland Road Station, he would have been willing to stake the most cherished thing in his life—the chance of seeing Victorine once more, of feasting his eyes on her dazzling and elusive beauty, of listening to the melody of her voice and

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bird-like ripple of her laughter. And should he—could he—throw such an opportunity away? Had he not walked miles and miles in the faint hope of finding her by some happy accident; and now that she had actually written him, proposing a meeting, and promising him, with all the emphasis of feminine italics, that she would be alone, could he turn a churlish back upon the proffered kindness of the gods? It seemed hard, truly. But still John, for all his lover-like craving for even a glimpse of the radiant face of his mistress, had been thoroughly frightened—frightened to the extent of wishing in most unlover-like fashion that the seductive vision of the girl had never come across his prosaic path—frightened even to the point of determining that, in real life at any rate, he would never again be persuaded to have anything more to do with romance. And terror of possible consequences now wrought as a discordant, destructive element among the poor shreds and patches which were left over from his once pleasant daydreams. To accept, even to think of accepting, Victorine's subtly-worded invitation would be the sheerest madness. He saw it all. It was simply a trap cunningly devised for his unwary feet. Clearly enough, she and her friends, who had already proclaimed their desire and intention of getting him out of their way, had come to the conclusion that it would be necessary to act circumspectly in the carrying out of their plan. They had found it inconvenient to strike him down in the open street, shoot him in a train or omnibus, or pitch him over the embankment into the river. As Ben had said, there

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are policemen in London, and their presence makes reckless slaughtering in frequented thoroughfares on the whole rather difficult. Equally clearly, too, when, in view of this obstacle they had decided to try secret means to get him into their power, they would be likely to go to work in the most far-sighted and circuitous way. They would never have been guilty of making open statement of their scheme—of writing him, in effect: "We want to kill you. Please meet us at a certain time and place that you may be killed." And so they had done exactly what anyone whose wits were sharpened by fear might have anticipated. They had put—even now John persisted in regarding Victorine as a passive, if not as a completely innocent agent in the matter—they had put the girl forward as a decoy, knowing his admiration for her, and believing that through this device they would have no great difficulty in casting their net about him, and making him secure. It was plain as a pikestaff. There was no change of attitude, as he had at first absurdly imagined; only a clever change and enlargement of plan. The suggested meeting with Victorine was simply a blind, a part of a well-thought-out line of action. He saw through it all, and shuddered.

In reviewing the situation as a whole, therefore, John, like a certain distinguished statesman, realised that there were three courses open to him. He might, for example, take Victorine at her word, and accept the appointment, relying implicitly on her good faith. Or he might, in the second place, present himself at the place and hour named, but secretly armed, and

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prepared for any possible emergency ; in which case he would ask someone—say, Ben Chadwick—to accompany and support him. Or, thirdly and flatly, he might decide not to go at all. The first suggestion he came gradually to consider as settled in a negative sense ; he had every reason in the world, he felt, not to take the girl at her word, and therefore to act on the supposition that she had written in good faith would be little short of lunacy. To regard her letter as a challenge, on the other hand, and to turn up at Charing Cross with the determination of following matters up to the bitter end, seemed heroically attractive in the abstract, but might practically be held as undesirable. For why run unnecessarily into dangers that might just as well be avoided ? The idea of trying conclusions in this way single-handed already filled him with vague alarm ; and he hardly felt that he could depend upon Ben, as in a similar crisis Aramis might have depended upon Athos or Porthos, as a fitting and efficient companion in arms. This line of procedure being in its turn rejected, he was driven to the third course by simple default. It was not a romantic course, certainly ; it was, to be frank, a course which would have struck him as utterly contemptible had he found it adopted by the hero of one of his favourite books. But John had by this time, after a skulking fashion which he did not like to scrutinise too critically, ceased to regard his once beloved novels as presenting an ideal to which he was bound to square his own affairs. In his actual life there were the demands of wisdom to be kept in mind. And Wisdom, as it appeared to him, said very emphatically : “ John Smith, don’t make a fool of

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yourself! This girl Victorine, of whom you know so little, is clearly enough a mysterious, irresponsible, and probably dangerous character. At best, you can do yourself no good; at worst, you may do yourself a great deal of harm, by bothering about her. Do not be blinded by her beauty and superficial charm. She is simply laying snares for you. As you value your happiness and your life, leave her alone."

By Sunday morning John Smith had thought his way round to the conclusion that this view of the matter was thoroughly sound. He *would* leave Victorine alone. Come what might of it, he would not pay the slightest attention to her letter, but would keep as far as he possibly could from Charing Cross Station on the following night. He even began to plan a call for that evening on a friend he had not seen for years, in the neighbourhood of Hampstead Heath.

His determination was strengthened by the conversation he had with Ben Chadwick that same afternoon, when that faithful friend called and took him off for a walk along the river-side to Chiswick Strand and Kew.

For, judging from the unusual drift of his talk, Mr. Chadwick must, in the meanwhile, have been devoting himself industriously to a careful perusal of newspapers, police journals, and volumes dealing with the darker sides of London life; from the columns and pages of which he had culled—it must be assumed for John's delectation and edification—a most varied and picturesque assortment of blood-curdling incident and adventure. Had John ever happened to read a book called "The Mysteries of Paris," by a chap named

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Soo, or something like that? John had read that instructive work, which, indeed, stood at the moment, with "Monte Cristo" and "Jack Sheppard" as its right and left hand supporters, on the shelf over the washstand in his bedroom. Well, according to Ben's statements—which he gave out as "gospel truth"—the hair-raising themes of Soo's narrative did not begin to compare with such tragedies as were of daily and nightly occurrence in the streets and houses of the English metropolis. If only a chap like Soo, or whatever his name was, would undertake to write the "Mysteries of London." My eye! but that would be a book, if you like! Talk about Sicily or Corsica, the lonely parts of Greece, the wild mountain ranges of California! An occasional bandit or stage-robber—why, that was nothing! For London, it now appeared, was the chosen and particular home of thugs, *sabreurs*, garotters, professional assassins of all kinds, anarchists, socialists, false coiners, house-breakers, murderers' clubs, and secret societies whose lightest amusements were robberies, tortures, and bloodshed. What! one never heard of all these ghastly things? Why, man alive, of course one never heard of them—that is, in the ordinary way of business. They belonged to—to subterranean London. But there they were; and the most horrible circumstance about the whole affair was, that every now and then—perhaps by mere accident, perhaps through a little inadvertence or recklessness on his own part—some quiet-going, seemingly respectable, law-abiding citizen would get himself entangled in the meshes of underground scoundrelism. And then, what was the result? Ben did not quote Virgil, for

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the classics were out of his line ; but, nevertheless, he translated a famous thought of the Latin poet into his own vernacular. It was easier to get into a mess of that kind than to get out of it again. And if you would only read the newspapers, old man, you would see how often people dropped out of sight in the strangest and most unexpected fashion. Well, when a fellow dropped out of sight, it meant that he had been done for. He first disappeared—that was all. Oh, there were a hundred ways of getting rid of him! Scotland Yard knew a thing or two about that. Why, there were men that day in London who, like the fellow in the play—"Macbeth," wasn't it? Ben had seen it last summer at a provincial theatre when he was off on his holiday—could be hired for a sovereign or two to make away with anybody. There were clubs where chaps actually drew lots as to who should have the fun of smashing a chap over the head, or sticking him between the ribs. And then a paragraph or two in the papers about a mysterious occurrence somewhere or other, or a frightful tragedy at Whitechapel, or the sudden disappearance of some venerable old gentleman—the deacon of a chapel, perhaps—finished the matter. A chap could never be too cautious in making friends.

And so forth, and so forth. And as Ben dilated with surprising interest and facile eloquence upon his gruesome topic, John's heart sank deeper and deeper within him. Under the circumstances, all this talk was exceedingly disquieting.

That night when he went to bed, the voice of Wisdom spoke louder, more urgently than ever. Victorine clearly belonged to that world of subter-

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anean London of which his friend had given such a vivid picture. He would have nothing more to do with her. He would resolutely dismiss her seductive image from his thoughts.

The next evening, towards nine o'clock, a tall and rather slight figure, tightly buttoned up in a winter overcoat, and with a bowler hat jammed down over his brows, descended from an omnibus just outside the Charing Cross terminus, threaded his perilous way among hansom cabs and four-wheelers, and struck out towards the station. He walked like a man in some uncertainty about his movements; stopped several times on the pavement to glance round rapidly, or allow another pedestrian to overtake and pass him; and once turned sharply on his heel, and took several steps back in the direction of the Strand. Then, as if under the influence of a fresh and unchangeable determination, he dashed forward once more, with long strides, towards the booking-office.

It was John Smith hastening to keep the appointment he had so wisely abandoned with the girl he had finally and irrevocably made up his mind to forget!

CHAPTER XII

IN WHICH LOVE, AS USUAL, GETS THE BETTER OF DISCRETION

PERHAPS there is no time in his life when a man feels such a thorough contempt for himself as he does when, having carefully thought out a policy of prudence and self-restraint, he proceeds forthwith to plunge, eyes open, into those very absurdities of behaviour which he had determined, at all hazards, to avoid. Some people are relatively sensitive, while others are comparatively callous, in thinking over their infractions of the higher law ; but we are all at one in hating to have to pass judgment upon ourselves as fools. Moralists occasionally edify us with vivid descriptions of the pangs of remorse over evil done and good left undone. Yet the cynic may still be right in doubting whether such rackings of conscience are, in the average of cases, a whit more severe than the stings of vanity and self-respect, when wisdom serves only to give us a bitter sense of our folly, and is powerless to check us in our headlong pursuit of it.

John Smith was a fool. He needed no one to force that singularly unpleasant fact upon his attention. He knew that he had no business sneaking about that Monday night in the dismal and draughty purlieus of Charing Cross Station. Till six o'clock

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that evening, when he had left the office, it had been his fixed intention to go straight home to Hammer-smith, and there to spend the hours before bedtime in the placid, if somewhat monotonous, quietude of his mother's warm and cosy sitting-room. He was fully and keenly aware, even at that moment, that such a course of action was, under the circumstances, the only one of which calm judgment could possibly approve. He had argued it all out with himself again and again ; the results of his reasoning were clearly before him for guidance and direction ; and he understood perfectly that not to do as he had arranged to do would be to set deliberately at defiance every consideration of safety for himself and duty towards his mother. He had not changed his mind one iota about Victorine, and the only too evident nature of the designs she had upon him. He had not shifted his ground by a hair's breadth in regard to the dangers he was about to incur in the new adventure upon which, he had firmly decided, nothing should induce him to embark. And here he was at Charing Cross, ten minutes, as the big clock over the booking-office told him, in advance of the hour set by the girl for their meeting. Fool !—yes ; he was a fool, if ever one lived ; he knew it—he cursed himself for his folly ; he even turned sick at the thought of the risks he was about to run. Still, there he was ! Of course, there was even now time to turn back. But to turn back at the last moment—that suggested itself to him only as a kind of crowning absurdity. And after all, even if he should turn back—

He pushed open the heavy swing-door of the first-class waiting-room, and entered. One rapid, search-

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ing glance sufficed him to take in the entire scene. There were the various groups of people and miscellaneous individuals who are usually to be found in such a place—the stout, uneasy women, with babies and bundles innumerable ; the regular, business-like travellers, with their wraps, portmanteaus, and evening newspapers ; the dozers in comfortable corners, who seemed to have no more part or lot in the bustle of a metropolitan terminus than the cat curled up beneath the table ; the tremulous old ladies, whose anxious faces and nervous bobbings to and fro testified to their deeply-rooted conviction that their train, announced to start in half an hour, might take it into its head to go off at any time, and be rather pleased than otherwise over the thought of leaving them behind ; the seedy-looking, chilly folks who had stolen in for the warmth and comfort they had no hope of finding elsewhere ; and the whispering couples who had clearly chosen that public apartment as the one fitting spot for lovers' quarrels and reconciliations. John's eyes swept in an instant this strange medley of human types, resting nowhere till it lighted on a single slight figure, sitting apart, on the further side of the room. Her face was turned away at the moment ; but he knew her—as he would have known her anywhere, among a hundred thousand—by the easy grace of her provoking attitude, the admirable poise of her little head, the something indescribable yet unmistakable—a certain subtle charm of self-possession and distinction about her appearance and mien—which marked her off completely from all the girls he had ever seen. His heart gave a wild throb, and he stood entranced. How good she was to look

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at! and how petty and trivial any personal sacrifice would be compared with the heavenly privilege of speaking to her again, and of holding that small, neatly-gloved hand of hers even for a second in his own! Prudence! danger! A fig for all such things! The next instant he was standing before her; her large grey eyes were lifted to his, blotting out the rest of the world; and the smile he remembered so well—that radiant, haunting, enigmatical smile—had given him recognition and welcome. The crisis had passed; and John, throwing every doubt and question to the winds, had yielded himself absolutely and unconditionally to the spell of the charmer.

“Mr. Smith,” she said—her low, rich voice made every pulse thrill, and lent a weird music to the most casual phrase—“sit down.” She drew her dress about her, to make room for him beside her on the long seat. “Do you know, this is awfully good of you. I was so afraid you mightn’t come!”

“Not come!” John exclaimed. “Why, how could you even think of such a thing?” To John himself, at that moment, it seemed as if he could never have felt the slightest hesitation about accepting the appointment; it was so impossible to conceive that he could ever have decided to cast away such a golden opportunity as this. “Of course, when I knew that you wanted to see me—oh, yes, I know I’m a duffer! but you don’t imagine that I’m such a duffer as all that. I say, Miss—Miss Victorine, I got your letter on Friday morning, and positively it seemed as if Monday evening would never arrive!”

How delicious it was to hear her rippling laugh again, though it did make it so hard for him to tell

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whether she intended to treat what he said seriously or as a jest.

"Really, that sounds quite sentimental, Mr. Smith," she said, in her light, bantering way; "quite like the novels I remember your father and mother didn't read. Only, I'm afraid that, at that rate, I must have interfered a good deal with your peace of mind. I didn't mean to upset you."

"Peace of mind!" answered John contemptuously. "Good heavens! I haven't had any peace of mind since the night I met you—and never expected to know what it was again. Victorine"—he was sitting very close to her; her skirt touched his knee; he caught, as he glanced down, a ravishing glimpse of one firm, neat little foot peeping coquettishly out from beneath the dark dress. Perhaps these circumstances conspired, with the excitement which naturally followed upon the discharge of feelings long pent up, to turn the young man's head. At all events, he grew, of a sudden, exceedingly bold—and bold beyond the point at which he was any longer astonished at himself. As for the other people in the room—as for the room itself—they no longer existed. He was alone with his mistress, somewhere in celestial space. "Victorine," he said, in a thick whisper, "you needn't play that you don't understand. You understand just as well as I do. That walk from Portland Road Station began a new life for me. Everything else was past and done with. I couldn't think of anything any more—except you. I—I didn't care for anything any more—except you. And I thought of you all the time—I swear I did!"

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"And after I had told you to forget me," said the girl slowly.

"How was I to forget you?" John responded explosively. "I couldn't, and—and—hang it all! I didn't want to. There! Perhaps you don't quite realise what I did, Victorine. They may have said something about it to you; but how could they understand? I was determined to find you again; and night after night I went round and round Bloomsbury, where I fancied it was most likely that you would be, in the mad hope that by some accident I might chance to run across you. I never did; it was just as if you had somehow been swallowed up. And then"—John's face was hot, and his lips quivered with excitement—"then I caught an awfully bad cold, and was ill—and—and—there it all seemed to end."

"Poor fellow," said Victorine, very quietly. "And did you really care for me as much as all that?"

The look in her eyes as she turned them frankly upon his was different from anything he had ever seen in them before.

"And then I was wretched—oh, I can't tell you how wretched I was! And you know what happened next—those men—their threats—and—and I thought I had lost you altogether. Then the other morning that last letter of yours came—"

"Do you know why I wrote it?"

"I only know that when I read it," John began; but Victorine broke him off sharply.

"Cannot you guess why I wrote it?" she persisted.

"No," said John blankly; "I don't know, and I can't guess. How should I?"

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"You silly boy!" The girl dropped her eyes. "Because—because I wanted to see you again," she said very deliberately.

"Victorine!" exclaimed John, "you don't mean—"

"Why shouldn't I mean it?" she said. "I did want to see you again, Mr. Smith." Caring nothing for the other people in the waiting-room, he had laid his hand gently on hers, and he noticed that she did not push it away. "I knew all the while that it was all wrong—that I had no business to—to bother you; that it wasn't kind of me to—you know what I want to say—you remember what I told you before we parted the other night. But it was no use. I thought of that evening over and over again—"

"I thought of it all the time—yes, *all the time*," John put in; and he even pressed her hand a little as it lay beneath his own on her lap.

"And then," she continued, "I came to realise more and more how kind you had been to me—how helpful, and attentive, and good. A girl like me doesn't expect a gentleman to treat her as you treated me, Mr. Smith. Oh, I know what I'm talking about; it's true." Consciousness of virtue, and vague notions of heroism, and the ever-deepening feelings of love, had combined by this time to put poor John into a perfect glow of self-satisfaction. "And so—well, perhaps you'll laugh at me—"

"Laugh at you!" exclaimed John, quite fiercely.

"But I wanted to tell you how much I appreciated your kindness, Mr. Smith—"

"Oh, don't call me Mr. Smith," he interrupted, with a splutter; "it sounds so formal!"

"Well, then"—and it seemed to him that those

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great grey eyes of hers looked right down into his soul, though there was the oddest flicker of a smile somewhere about the corners of her mouth—"I wanted you to know that I really did feel grateful—oh, so grateful!—for all that you did for me—Vespasian!"

That one unfortunate word brought him down to earth again with a terrific bump. His cheeks, scarlet already, turned purple.

"No, no!" he muttered hoarsely, "not Vespasian, Victorine—not Vespasian." He could not bear that any element of absurdity should be left to mar their delicious relationships. "That was all nonsense, you know—a joke—just a silly joke—nothing else. My name isn't Vespasian at all—and—and never was, you know. It's simple John."

He hardly knew whether he was sorry or glad that she took his confession with the merriest of laughs.

"Do you know, you naughty boy," she said, with the ripple still in her voice, "I had my suspicions from the first. FitzHugh Vespasian did seem such an impossible name; and—well, somehow you didn't look a bit like it—not a bit! But I like simple John so much better; so it's all right, you see. And so—John"—she made a pause before bringing out the name, and then rounded her lips into such a bewitching little pout in pronouncing it, that he had the hardest matter in the world to prevent himself from kissing her, then and there, on the spot, spectators notwithstanding—"and so—John—though I knew you would think it awfully funny of me to do so, I made up my mind to write you, and ask you to meet me somewhere that I might

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tell you all about it, and that I might explain everything that must have puzzled you in—in the behaviour of my friends.”

Under the spell of the girl's presence, John had forgotten altogether that she had any friends, or, if she had any, that their conduct had been in the least out of the usual course. And now this sudden return to a subject which, till then, had been uppermost in his mind, produced a kind of jar. It was like another fearful drop from the seventh heaven of bliss into the midst of things which he would willingly have banished from his attention, once and for all.

“Never mind about explanation, Victorine,” he began. He had a vague suspicion that the less said about such things the better.

“Ah, but I *do* mind!” she interjected fervently. “You must have been astonished, and hurt, and worried, John—you must have thought us all crazy. It is only right that you should know how it all happened.”

“I don't want to hear a word about it,” said John magnanimously. “All I care for, Victorine, is that I have seen you again—that I have talked with you—that I have learned that you do like me just a little bit. Nothing else in the world matters!”

He felt that he had spoken in quite a fine heroic strain, and was wonderfully well-pleased with himself in consequence—the more so as the slight hand-pressure with which he had accompanied his little bit of gasconade was not only not resented, but was even gently returned.

“Ah, that's all very well,” the girl answered, “and

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it's just like you to put it in that generous way, John." Her eyes were luminous with pleasure and admiration, and the young man may be forgiven if he experienced a thrill of secret pride. "But you must listen to me, for I won't have the matter dropped like that. If you don't want to listen to me for your own sake, you must do so for mine, for I wouldn't for all the world have you think of me more harshly than I deserve. Tell me frankly—what *did* you make of that first letter of mine when you got it?"

"Well," answered John, speaking very slowly, and with no little embarrassment, "of course I was—well—surprised."

"And then the men who, you thought, were following you? They must have surprised you, too!"

"Indeed they did," John replied; and his words unconsciously caught the subtle emphasis of truth.

Victorine nodded her head.

"I am sure I don't wonder at that," she said. "But were you alarmed? Did you make any attempt to understand it all? Could you even guess what all the trouble was about?"

"Well, naturally, I couldn't help feeling a trifle"—he searched about for a moment in doubt as to the best word for his purpose—"a trifle—uncomfortable, you know. It does make a man uncomfortable to feel that people have designs on his life," he went on, in a weak, explanatory way. He began to fancy that since the conversation had taken this unpleasant turn, he was not shining nearly as much as he had done a few moments before. "I really thought

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those—those friends of yours intended to shoot me—or something—'pon my word, I did! They seemed—you don't mind my saying so, do you?—they seemed capable of anything, you know. They were such funny-looking chaps; I mean"—he paused awkwardly, with the sense of having gone too far.

"Their appearance is somewhat peculiar, I admit," said Victorine, smiling reassuringly. "Besides," she added, in the lightest possible way, "your misgivings were certainly not without basis, John. There was a time when they *did* think of shooting you in earnest."

John turned goose-fleshy all over.

"Oh, they did, did they?" he said blankly. Here he was on the seamy side of his romance again.

"Why, of course, they did," she answered, with some surprise. "You remember my first letter, don't you? I told you then what they intended to do. You didn't imagine that that was written as a joke, I suppose?"

"It didn't seem much like a joke, certainly," John acknowledged, recalling his conversation about the matter with Ben. "Only I thought that the threats might have been—well, just threats, you know."

Victorine actually laughed.

"Not likely," she replied decisively. "You don't know the fellows if you fancy they would waste their time in empty warnings. What they say they mean, even if—" she stopped abruptly, but not before the bewildered John had detected that curious hardening in her voice and expression which, brief as their intercourse had been, had amazed him more than once before. "But we needn't bother about that

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now," she went on, with a funny little gesture, as of one who puts an ugly subject behind him in the hope of forgetting it. "That's over and done with. They did for a little while mean to get rid of you. And can't you guess why?"

"Indeed, I can't," answered John dismally. "Unless"—he gulped frantically before he finished his sentence—"unless it was—because of you."

The whole affair was one of tragic significance to him. Yet this inexplicable girl was so impressed by the humour of it all that she threw herself back and laughed aloud.

"Capital, John!" she said, patting him roguishly on the arm. "You are a man of great acumen, and of infinite gallantry as well. You are quite right. It was about me."

"Then they must have taken me very seriously," he almost groaned.

"Why, of course, they did!" she answered, in a tone of astonishment. "They take everything very seriously; and when such a man as you are gets himself mixed up in their affairs, you can't wonder that they should determine at any cost to see the thing through—can you?"

Perhaps there was a delicate compliment implied in this way of putting the case; but John was so much preoccupied with all that was suggested by the notion of "seeing the thing through" that the innuendo escaped his attention.

"But I am sure I had no earthly intention of mixing up in their affairs," he protested.

"Perhaps not," she replied cheerfully; "but then, you know, all sorts of things happen that we never

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intend. Stay! I said that one chief reason I had in asking you to meet me here this evening was that I might tell you the truth about this strange business."

It did not occur to John until many weeks later, when all sorts of extraordinary and terrible events had thrown a fierce light back upon every detail of their interview, that the girl had been in no hurry to redeem her promise of confidence, and had, in fact, only done so after feeling her way, as it were, to his own judgment in the matter.

"Well, I will tell you the truth, and in as few words as possible. Let us see. How many of my friends have you met? Just two, isn't it?"

John nodded.

"Just two," he said. "Only I haven't exactly met them, you know—at least—"

He remembered the midnight encounter near St. Clement's Danes, and the sentence died away on his lips.

"Do you recollect exactly what they look like?" asked Victorine.

"Do I recollect what they look like? I should rather say I did! I shouldn't forget them in a hurry, I can tell you. One—the chap I saw first—the night I took you from Portland Road Station, you know—is a great, big, heavy fellow, with thick eyebrows and a red beard."

"You've got *him* pat enough, anyhow," said Victorine. "And he isn't a beauty, is he? Well, that's my uncle."

"Your uncle!" gasped John incredulously.

How did such a hideous monster dare to claim

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avuncular relationship with the dainty creature at his side?

"Yes, my uncle," Victorine repeated, in a tone of conviction. "My own mother's brother. You don't see much family likeness, eh?" she went on, with a merry little laugh. "There's no accounting for these things, certainly, though people do talk so much about heredity, and all the rest of it. And as for the other man, he's a good deal younger, isn't he — tall, pale, with long moustaches, and big glasses?"

"That's him," said John.

"Well, that's Alexis, the man I was engaged to marry."

"The devil you were!" John ejaculated, with a violent start.

"Of course I was," Victorine replied. "You needn't be surprised, John. Don't you see that that was exactly how all the trouble came about?"

She dropped her eyes, and began to press the toe of one slender little foot quite energetically against the ground, while a rosy flush spread over her cheeks. She had never looked more bewitching than at that moment of girlish hesitation and confusion.

"Naturally, he guessed—I mean, you can understand—the—the—" and all of a sudden, blushing as she was, she lifted her great clear eyes to his, and frankly met his admiring gaze. "Oh, you know what I mean, John! He saw that—that I liked you; and he was angry. That's all."

John seized her hand, and pressed it rapturously.

"And so he wanted to murder me, did he?" he whispered, with his face close to hers.

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"To get you out of the way, you know," Victorine explained.

"Yes—I understand," said John slowly. "Of course—to get me out of the way. Yes—yes! But, after all, that was rather a—rather an odd kind of notion, wasn't it?"

"It may seem a little odd to you, John," was the reassuring reply. "But then things strike different people differently—don't they? My uncle was awfully wild because—because, for family reasons—and money, and things, you know—he had made up his mind that I was to marry Alexis, and no one else. Uncle brought me up from childhood, for I lost my father and mother when I was a mere tot of a thing, and he has always treated me and looked upon me as his own daughter. And Alexis is the son of a dear, dear dead friend of his own, and—well, it's a long, complicated story, and I'll tell you all about it some day. But it doesn't matter now. Only uncle is a very strange man—very obstinate and self-willed, and the moment he thought that anything might occur to interfere with the strongest wish of his life, he was almost beside himself; indeed, it was quite terrible to see his grief. You can understand how he would feel, can't you?"

Ye—es; John could understand, or, at any rate, under the fascination of the girl's presence, he thought he could, in rather a dim way, understand something of the poor uncle's disappointment. Still, murder seemed rather an extreme measure, didn't it? It wasn't usual—

"Perhaps not for Englishmen," Victorine interrupted, quite earnestly; oddly enough taking exactly Ben's

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own line of argument and explanation. "Of course, Englishmen have their own ideas about such things. But then they are cold and phlegmatic, you know, and must not judge every other nationality by their own standards. Men of other races love more fiercely, and hate more fiercely, than the ordinary Englishman."

"I heard your uncle talking some extraordinary language that night when he took you away," said John. "I didn't know what it was."

"That was Polish," answered Victorine. "My uncle and Alexis are both Poles."

"Then you are Polish, too?" said the young man, by no means sure how he liked the discovery.

John had the middle-class Briton's wholesome suspicion of foreigners of all kinds. And Poles were, so to speak, foreigners in an exaggerated degree.

"On my mother's side, yes; on my father's, I am American. But then, naturally, I can speak my mother's tongue. And so, John," she continued, getting back to the main theme, "you mustn't be too hard upon dear uncle or Alexis. They are not like you, and it's difficult for you to understand them at first, and see things as they do, simply because you are an Englishman and they are Poles. If you only knew Alexis, you'd find that he was the gentlest and sweetest of men, and you'd admire—because you are so noble yourself—his courage and manliness, and his intense appreciation of all that is true and good."

Perhaps Victorine did not observe the comical expression of doubt that at this point came into

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John's face. At any rate, she rattled on in the most facile style :

" But then he is full of sentiment and passion ; he has been devoted to me ever since we were children together thousands of miles away ; and, naturally, he would think no more of crushing the man who came in his way, and threatened his love, than he would of treading upon an insect that happened to be in his path. That's Alexis, the dear boy ! "

" Oh, that's Alexis, is it ? " said John glumly.

" Yes ; and you only want to know him to like him awfully, and he will like you just as much when he comes to know you. Two such men as you are are bound to be the very best of friends. And that reminds me, John, my uncle and Alexis are most anxious to meet you. Won't you come round soon and spend a good long evening with us all ? "

At this amazing proposal—for, under the circumstances, it was nothing short of amazing, though Victorine's manner implied that she thought it the most natural thing in the world—John Smith nearly fell from his seat. Did the girl expect, in this bare-faced fashion, to induce him to walk straight into the lion's den ?

" Good heavens, Victorine ! " he stammered, struggling with his astonishment ; " what *are* you talking about ? If these people want to kill me, as you confess—"

" Oh, I assure you they don't want to kill you now ! " Victorine interrupted. " Ah "—she made a funny little gesture of impatience, such as John now realised no English girl would use—" I see you don't understand Alexis ! "

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John acknowledged that he was afraid he didn't. As a matter of fact, he no longer felt that he understood anything. Listening to Victorine, and vainly trying to detect in her talk the play of ordinary motives and familiar passions, he seemed to be translated into a world as remote and unreal as that of a comic opera.

"But you admitted that this man—this Alexis—wanted to kill me?" he persisted.

"Of course, I did, because he *did* want to do so. But that's all over now, you know, and we needn't bother any more about it."

"I don't see why," John answered doggedly. For his part, he saw every reason to bother about it as much as ever. "If he hated me last week, he must hate me just as much, perhaps more"—he thought of the present meeting, and what the sweetest and gentlest of men might see fit to do about it—"yes, perhaps even more to-day."

"John," said the girl solemnly, "I'm afraid you're awfully dense."

"Dense!" John ejaculated; and then, noticing that several people on the other side of the room looked curiously across at them, he dropped his voice to a whisper. "Look here, Victorine!" he went on, quite angrily; "you may fancy I'm a fool if you like, but, confound it all! I don't know what you're talking about."

His companion's eyes fell, and the rosy flush which added so much to her beauty surged into her cheeks again.

"Alexis at first mistook you altogether," she said slowly. "He believed you were one of those young

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men—there are lots of them in London, you know—who go about picking up acquaintance with defenceless girls, and who care nothing what happens to them when once they get tired of them. It was that which made him so angry. He is the soul of honour himself, John, and hates everything low and mean. It was to defend *me* that he made me write to you as I did in that first letter. But when he found out that it was all a ridiculous mistake on his part—”

A light broke in upon John's troubled mind.

“Then that *was* the mistake you referred to?” he aid.

“Certainly it was! And absurd as it seems to us, you can understand his feelings so long as he did not realise his error, and thought that you wanted to take advantage of me. But when I had convinced him that you were not that sort of a man, but, like himself, a gentleman through and through, then he at once felt differently towards you. Besides—”

She stopped short.

“Besides what?”

The more Victorine explained, the deeper John's confusion seemed to grow.

“I don't think I ought to tell you anything more,” said the girl, turning her face away.

“Indeed, you must tell me everything,” John answered resolutely. He waited a moment, leaning towards her. “I want to know all, Victorine—all!”

Then came her slow reply.

“Well, Alexis and I are not engaged any longer—at least, for the present.”

John could only stare at her in stupid silence. It

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seemed idle to try to find anything appropriate to say to such a speech as that.

"Didn't I tell you it was he I *was* to marry? But when he saw, and when my uncle saw that—that—oh, John, you know what I mean!—that I didn't really love him as they thought I did, and—and as I used to think I did—oh, they are so noble and good, John! Don't you see how noble and good they are?"

He clutched wildly at what he fancied must be her meaning.

"You don't tell me that Alexis was willing to give you up—together—because—of me!" he exclaimed, with a gasp. Such goodness and nobleness transcended anything his poor brain had ever conceived. Surely he was still in the world of comic opera! (or was he in Verona, where the Two Gentlemen lived?)

"It is my happiness he desires—my happiness, and not his own," Victorine said, very softly. The tears were in her eyes, and she drew out a tiny, delicately-scented handkerchief to wipe them away. "Think of it, John! Such absolute unselfishness, I know, will appeal to you. Yet you can hardly guess what a sacrifice he is making—for my sake. All his life"—again she brushed away the now fast-flowing tears, while the room just rocked and heaved about John Smith as he listened bewildered to her story—"all his life he has looked forward to the day when he would be able to call me his wife. He went out to Chicago a couple of years ago just to see me. He came from Warsaw the other day to meet me on my return here from the United States.

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But when he saw that—that I was not wholly and entirely his; that, perhaps, I—I was wavering a little in my love—ever so little, but his keen eye detected the change—what do you think he did?" How beautiful those great clear eyes of hers were, luminous now with tears! "He came straight to me. 'Vicky,' he said. He"—a half-sob choked her utterance for a moment—"he always calls me Vicky, you know—"

"Does he now?" said John idiotically; for somehow she seemed to expect him to speak, and nothing else occurred to him to say. "That's very nice of him, isn't it?"

"'Vicky,' he said, 'not for the world would I do anything to jeopardise your happiness; that is dearer to me than life itself. I see that you are in doubt about yourself. I release you, if you wish to be released.' And when I began to cry—for oh, John, Alexis is so kind and good!—he simply said, 'Vicky, let everything be over between us for three months; by that time you will have learned to know your heart. And then, if you still love me as much as ever you did, tell me; if not, God bless you! I will make any sacrifice for your sake.'"

At this point Victorine was so completely overcome by the recollection of her lover's chivalrous behaviour that she buried her face in her handkerchief, and gave free vent to her tears.

Here was a situation! To say that John was confused, embarrassed, bewildered, would be to give a very inadequate idea of his condition. He was nonplussed completely. Never, in his wildest visions of romance, had he ever conceived himself as the

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appointed comforter of a weeping girl—let alone of a girl who had all but confessed to him that she had thrown over such a paragon of all the virtues as Alexis was portrayed as being in favour of himself! And to cap the climax, in the public waiting-room of a railway station! In after years, he saw the entire business in all its essential absurdity. But at the moment there was nothing absurd about it. It was deeply, poignantly tragic. And what the deuce was he to do? What was any fellow to do with a young woman crying at his side, and half-a-dozen people looking on with newly-awakened interest from the other end of the room?

"I say, Victorine, don't, please, don't," he murmured. "It's all right, you know. Alexis is a brick, and no mistake! Victorine, don't!"

By this time he had his arm about the girl's slender waist, and was pressing her closely to him.

"Oh, John," she said suddenly, looking straight into his face, and smiling through her tears, "what *will* you think of me?"

What John thought of her just then was only this—that she was the prettiest, dearest, sweetest girl he had ever known. And he told her so.

Upon which she dried her eyes rapidly, and began to laugh. And then, for half an hour, they had the most delightful and confidential little talk together—all in whispers, and parentheses, and unfinished sentences; and John sat all the while with his arm round her waist, and she never once suggested that he should take it away. When at length she insisted (for it may have been the tenth time) that she really must be getting home, he led her with the tenderest

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care out into the wind and driving sleet of the Strand; and only on her most peremptory denial of his escort (she laid her wishes upon him as a command) relinquished his proposal of taking her home. And when it was finally settled that he was not to accompany her, he called a hansom cab, and handed her into it with an assurance which would have surprised him had he stopped to think of it; and gave the cabman the directions she had given to him—to drive as rapidly as possible to the Broad Street Station, where it seemed that Uncle Michael was to meet her, and whence he would see her home. Then he leaned over, holding her hand a moment in his own.

“You won’t forget, John, will you?” she said earnestly. “Wednesday evening next, mind; and as much before eight o’clock as you like. You have the address.”

Yes; John had the address—he repeated it to her satisfaction; and he wouldn’t forget—not he!

“Good-bye, then—good-bye!”

A little kid-gloved hand was waved to him from the cab, and the vehicle dashed away.

CHAPTER XIII

IN WHICH JOHN PAYS A VISIT TO QUEMBY COURT, AND IS INTRODUCED, IN DUE COURSE, TO UNCLE MICHAEL AND OTHER FRIENDS OF THE CHARMER

"So you haven't heard another word from those bloomin' foreign scoundrels, eh, old man?"

John Smith lied to his friend without the slightest hesitation or tremor of voice.

"Not a word—so far."

"Then you may depend upon it, they've dried up completely," Ben said, in his cheeriest tones. "I thought they would as soon as they saw you had dropped hanging about after their gal. Well, John, you nearly got badly burned this time, didn't you? Never play with fire, my boy—never play with fire!" he went on, improving the occasion. "That gal would have got you into a pretty scrape if you'd ventured a bit farther; you may lay your last coin on that. I know the style. Take my advice, and for the future have nothing more to do with romance. It ain't safe or pleasant—outside of books."

And Ben, cocking his hat on one side, after his wont, wrung John's hand, and went off whistling merrily a few bars from a popular melody of the day. He was really delighted to find his friend so much

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better in health and spirits, and to be able to regard what he jocularly called John's "foreign complications" as things of the past. It will be readily understood that John had kept his own counsel in respect to Victorine's second letter, the interview in the waiting-room at Charing Cross, and the general change which had been wrought thereby in his feelings. Little did Ben guess, therefore, the reckless step which the enamoured young fellow deliberately contemplated taking the very next night.

For John had thoroughly made up his mind to accept Victorine's invitation to visit herself and her friends. His period of doubt was now over. He did not argue the matter; did not pause to inquire into the wisdom or unwisdom of his course; did not even trouble himself with any questions as to what the gentle Alexis and dear uncle might possibly see fit to do with him when once they had him in their power. The spell of the girl's beauty and fascination of manner was upon him; and the memory of his long and intimate talk with her, and the delirious thought that she had all but confessed her love for him, combined to obliterate every prudential consideration, to crush out every scruple, to set every misgiving at rest. He was now in the mood when a man snaps his fingers at discretion, and brushes reason contemptuously aside. He had passed the Rubicon, and did not care even to look back. Whithersoever Victorine beckoned him he would go—yes, though he might realise that he was marching open-eyed to his doom.

It is not to be inferred from this that he did not see the dangers in his way; still less that he was perfectly

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satisfied, turning over the whole matter as quietly and calmly as was possible to him at such a time, with the situation in which he found himself. His conversation with Victorine itself furnished ample food for thought, and thought not altogether of a pleasant character. Her manner throughout their interview had been marked by all the delightful frankness (if also by the capricious, though to him equally delightful fickleness of mood) to which he was now accustomed; and John would have dealt sharply with anyone who had ventured to cast the slightest doubt upon the absolute accuracy of everything she had said. And yet—to be honest with himself—what kind of opinion was he compelled to form of her story? Not exactly a reassuring one, certainly. It had sounded all very well so long as, sitting entranced by her side, he had been privileged to listen to the music of her voice and the bird-like ripple of her laughter; to feel the fascination of her bodily presence; to hold her little yielding hand clasped tightly within his own. Yes, it had sounded all very well—then; though, as he remembered, even in the telling, it had given him from time to time the oddest sense of being in a world altogether unlike that of his everyday experiences. But the day after is proverbially cynical; and somehow, considered dispassionately under its prosaic light, Victorine's account of herself and her friends did not seem exactly—he cast about a long while before he got the right word—did not seem exactly convincing. Unwonted circumstances which they had laughed away together overnight now stood out in all their gaunt and naked uniqueness; fantastic twists of motive and unaccountable freaks of be-

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haviour which at the time had struck him as nothing more than ludicrous, now assumed a serious shape, and rendered him distinctly uncomfortable. Could he, when he came to grapple with the problem—could he really believe in the model Alexis of the girl's narrative? in his chivalrous instincts? in his punctilious delicacy of sentiment? in his supra-mundane code of honour? Did it seem human—that is, human according to all his previous knowledge of humanity—that this young man, and the scarcely less incredible Uncle Michael, after going about night after night (as was candidly admitted) with murderous intentions against himself, should suddenly, and from no cause that could in a worldly sense be regarded as adequate, turn right-about face, throw all their scruples aside, and express a desire to welcome the man they had sought to kill into the intimacy of their family circle—and perhaps as the accepted lover of Victorine herself? Did it seem human? John shook his head in dull despair. He had had little experience of the *preux chevalier* in the flesh, it is true; but not all his preparation in novel-reading sufficed to minimise the extravagance of the claims which the girl's statement made upon his credence. Unwilling as he was to impugn her veracity, or to harbour a thought disloyal to the love he cherished for her, he was none the less fain to acknowledge that if things had happened just in the way she described, then the world in which she lived was vastly different from his world, and the chasm which divided Englishmen from foreigners a great deal deeper and wider than he, or even Ben himself, had ever imagined. And then—it was strange that such a detail should haunt

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him as it did ; but it kept forcing itself most perversely into all his meditations — what about Penny Whistle? He had been reminded how the unfortunate individual so strangely referred to by that name had disappeared mysteriously some six months before, and had not been heard of since ; and that unspecified tragedy, which, as he had not forgotten, had been employed in the way of solemn warning to himself, now hung upon his mind with constantly increasing oppressiveness. Perhaps it was foolish ; but no one can account satisfactorily for such things, and he blamed himself again and again for not having posed Victorine with Penny Whistle's fate, and settled once for all its possible bearing upon the problem of his own destiny.

With such doubts and difficulties keeping up a ceaseless clatter in his brain, poor John was certainly not at ease. But the fact was, that he had now wrought himself up to such a pitch of febrile excitement that no considerations of comfort, or even safety, any longer had the slightest practical weight with him. He was to see Victorine again ; he was to spend a few hours by her side, or, at least, near her. That was enough. Beyond that promise of unspeakable bliss he did not dream of looking. For thus had love so thoroughly transformed the once timid and self-conscious young fellow, that he never paused to take cognisance of any obstacle that might stand between his mistress and himself ; and so far as he thought of possible danger at all, thought of it only as adding a delicate zest to the undertaking to which he stood committed.

It was not without a good deal of trouble that,

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when Wednesday evening at length came round; John found his way to the house which Victorine had carefully indicated in her directions. The whole family, according to her statement, had moved from Bloomsbury almost immediately after the night when she and he had walked together from Portland Road Station, and were now temporarily lodged with a distant connection of Uncle Michael's second wife's sister (so he dimly made out the relationship) somewhere in the unattractive wilderness of brick and mortar which stretches in monotonous ugliness between King's Cross and Barnsbury. Thither, marvelling not a little over the change of neighbourhood and its conceivable advantages (other than domestic), John bent his steps through a cold, steady drizzle which hourly threatened to turn outright into snow; now following that Cockney instinct of locality of which we have already spoken, and which is well-nigh as sure in a maze of city thoroughfares as an Indian's in an unbroken forest; now stopping for enlightenment or encouragement at a dingy greengrocer's or a flaming "pub." At last, with the final assistance of a half-tipsy loafer, braced hopelessly against a corner lamp-post, he reached his destination—a certain Quemby Court; about which one could imagine what one pleased, but which proved in reality to be a very short, very narrow, very dark *cul-de-sac*, with a particularly malodorous gin-shop at one end, and a high blank wall at the other. To find the house itself was now a simple matter, and in a couple of seconds John stood on its doorstep, fumbling with the bell.

Love, we are often told, has thaumaturgic power;

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it can suffuse the most angular facts of life with a softening radiance. According to all regular precedent, therefore, our passionate pilgrim should have been entirely blind to the appearance of the place where he was once more to meet the lady of his heart. Unfortunately, however, his critical faculties remained active enough, amid all the tumult of anticipation, for him to take pretty accurate note of many things he would willingly have overlooked; for the results of his anxious survey were hardly exhilarating. Windows apparently closely curtained, and certainly with no trace of light behind them; a front door which, by its scarified condition, suggested daily poundings and scrapings by generations of wanton children; steps slippery with a thick coating of slimy mud; a battered beer-can dependent from the rusty railings; a pervading odour of onions; a general sense of slatternliness and dilapidation about the dwelling itself and its surroundings:—yes! John could have wished that he might have found the jewel he craved for his possession in a somewhat more appropriate setting.

He had ample time to make observations and deductions, since for several minutes his repeated ringing of the bell called forth no sign of life from within. More than once he stepped back on to the pavement, and glanced anxiously from window to window, afterwards returning with renewed vigour to the charge. Indeed, he was almost on the point of throwing up the whole thing as a bad job, and going off in disgust, when he caught the sound of heavy footsteps descending the stairs, and coming slowly along the passage. Instinctively he threw

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himself into an attitude of self-defence. Then the door was opened slightly—perhaps a couple of feet ; and John found himself confronted by a tall, fat, elderly woman holding a guttering candle.

“Well, young fellow, what do you want ?” inquired this person, without giving him a chance to make known the purpose of his visit. She had the wheezy breathing of an asthmatic subject ; though her English was fluent enough, she spoke with the slightest tinge of foreign accent ; her whole manner was as distinctly unamiable as her general appearance was uninviting.

John was taken aback.

“I have called to see Miss Victorine,” he said tentatively. It was thus that the girl had directed him to proceed.

“Miss who ?” demanded the woman, breathing harder than ever.

John repeated the name.

“Who are you, any way ?” With which brusque question his interlocutor held the candle aloft, and though the wind caught and swept the flame, evidently did her best to examine his face.

“I ?—I am John Smith,” answered the young man simply.

“Oh !”

Though it would have been impossible to say whether this exclamation was intended to express surprise, or satisfaction, or annoyance, or indeed any special emotion, it was at once manifest that John’s declaration of identity had a mollifying effect.

“Well, if you’re John Smith,” the woman went on, “you can walk right in, I guess.” And opening the

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door more generously, she made way for him to enter ; meanwhile protecting the light with one fat, bejewelled hand.

In the dark hall, John immediately came to grief over a huge trunk, which left but small space between itself and the opposite wall for any one to pass to the stairs. He was in too much of a tremor at the time to pay attention to such minor matters as personal damage ; but the bruise on his shin the next day testified to the violence of the collision.

"Don't fall over the trunk, young fellow," said his guide, adopting our common human habit of proffering advice when it is too late to be of service. "Guess you're some wet ;" and on John's acknowledging the correctness of the supposition, "well, just throw your hat and coat down there," indicating the trunk, which appeared to be the only article of furniture of which the hall could boast, "and then you can come right up with me. Vick expects you, I guess ; and you'll find a fire there where you can dry off good."

One thing only John seized upon in this rather incoherent speech—the fact that Vick expected him. He did not even pause to resent—as under other circumstances he certainly would have done—the familiar way in which this fat, untidy woman with the diamond rings referred to her. His heart beat violently as he stumbled up the stairs in the wake of the bearer of the candle, whose breathing, under stress of the exertion, grew more and more like the puffing of a donkey engine. When they reached the landing, she stopped for a moment to gasp ; then she threw open the door which faced the top of the staircase.

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"Vick," she called out, in her strident tones, "here's the young man you said was coming to see you. He looks pretty much like a drowned rat. You'd better let him dry off by the fire."

In this uncereemonious fashion was John ushered into the room ; but though he had a confused sense of being in the presence of a number of people who all turned as he entered, and of breathing an atmosphere laden with the fumes of tobacco-smoke, he realised nothing distinctly beyond the single supreme fact that Victorine was before him, and that his icy fingers were tightly clasped in her warm, soft hand.

"Why, John, this is indeed kind of you ! I hardly dared to expect you on such a night, though I should have been terribly disappointed, I admit, if you hadn't come. Wet ! I should say you were wet ! Aunt is right as usual ; in fact, she's always right. You must come and sit by the fire, or you'll be catching an awful cold—and all for my sake, too."

John would have liked to say that for her sake he would be willing to contract pneumonia, and die at once ; but he could do nothing better than stammer out some ineffective remark about being perfectly comfortable, except as to the feet.

"Well, you can toast your toes as long as you like now, John," said Victorine gaily.

"And a drop of something stiff and hot will help to fix him," said a deep bass voice on the other side of the central table.

"Capital ! that's a good idea of yours, Patrick," answered the girl, leading John, dazed and bewildered, towards the fire. "But stop !" she went

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on, "before you sit down, I must introduce you to all my friends—or rather, I must introduce them all to you, for they've heard so much of you that they know you already. Stand up straight, so that they may have a good look at you, John. That's it. This, all of you," addressing herself generally to the room, "is John Smith, who was so kind to me that night in the underground railroad. And now to do things in proper order. Here, John, is Uncle Michael, whom I know you've seen once or twice before."

John did his best to carry off the situation creditably, but he was powerless to overcome his embarrassment when he found himself actually shaking hands with the tall, massive, black-eyed, red-bearded man, who had figured so often and so unpleasantly in his ponderings by day and dreams by night.

"Glat to know you, sir—glat to know you!" said Uncle Michael warmly, though in extremely broken English. He held John's hand grasped as in a vice while he spoke. "I am delighted to haf de occasion to tank you for your gootness to my little girl here. You like her, *hein*?"

Utterly thrown off his guard by this unexpected question, John felt the blood surge into his cheek.

"Indeed, I do," he blurted out; and felt that he was getting redder than ever.

"Dat's right; we all like her. Yaw—she's a good little girl." And Uncle Michael's swarthy face crinkled into a smile beneath his shaggy eyebrows, as, with a curious inarticulate sound, which was pro-

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bably intended for a chuckle, he pulled vigorously at his short, untidy red beard.

Just then the fat woman who had escorted him upstairs re-entered the apartment, carrying a large tray on which were a number of tumblers, a plate of lemons, and a bottle of whisky.

"And this," said Victorine, seizing the opportunity, "is Aunt Anna, busy as usual in trying to make other people comfortable."

Aunt Anna deposited the tray on the table, and presented John with a couple of plump fingers.

"I'll have a glass of hot whisky and water ready for you in a couple of minutes," she said; "and then you'll feel better, I guess. Put the kettle on the fire, Bobby. It won't take long to boil."

The individual addressed as Bobby did as she requested, though the effort of leaning forward in his chair, and transferring the kettle from hearth to hob, seemed to tax him considerably, for he heaved a heavy sigh when the arduous enterprise was accomplished. Victorine introduced him to John at once, but did not seem to think it necessary to mention his surname. He nodded carelessly, saying nothing, and turned away to spit into the fire. He was a lanky fellow, perhaps forty years of age, with pale face, high cheek-bones, blue eyes, a forehead which appeared to jut out everywhere in bumps (perhaps indicative of immense intellectuality), and sandy hair, worn *à la Pompadour*.

"Bobby has only just come from Chicago, and doesn't know anything about London yet," Victorine explained, "though he has made up his mind that it rains here three hundred and fifty days out of the

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year. As if any weather wouldn't seem a relief to a person who's lived all his life in Chicago!"

"I guess you'd be glad enough to be back in Chicago, anyhow," remarked Bobby, in the most aggressively nasal twang John had ever heard, and with a manner which struck him as intensely disagreeable. Then he spat again into the fire, and seemed relieved.

"And this is Mrs. Bobby," Victorine continued, hurriedly turning John aside. Her haste gave him the idea either that she wished to get him away from Bobby, feeling that they would not hit it off very well together, or that she did not care to have the Chicago topic pursued further.

Mrs. Bobby rose from the sofa where she had been sitting, and welcomed John with somewhat oppressive dignity. She was a little woman, of exceedingly solemn appearance, with pinched features, a restless, hungry look about the eyes, close-fitting spectacles, and hair already turning to grey.

"I am proud to shake hands with any friend of Victorine's," she said slowly, measuring her words, and speaking like one accustomed to addressing immense public meetings.

Her voice, like her husband's, was of the high-pitched, shrill, American description. It was gradually becoming apparent to him that he was the only Englishman in the party, and the revelation of this fact made him feel some little alarm. He was by no means certain how well he was likely to get on with a lot of foreigners, concerning whose manners, customs, and prejudices, he was totally in the dark.

However, as Mrs. Bobby continued to gaze at him,

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in the expectation, as he imagined, that he would say something in reply to her speech, he braced himself to meet the emergency.

"I'm sure I am very proud to be regarded by you all as a friend of Victorine's," he said.

"And as you *are* a friend of mine, and as these are all friends of mine, they are friends of yours, eh? and so we are all friends together," said Victorine merrily. "*Les amis de nos amis*, you know. Come, Patrick, you must shake hands with John Smith, too. This is Patrick, John—and the best fellow you ever met, though he doesn't look it."

The individual thus presented took his pipe from his mouth, and responded with a genial laugh to the girl's sally.

"You little vixen," he said, pinching her cheek, "you'll never leave me alone, will you? She leads me such a life, Mr. Smith—such a life! The man that marries her—or rather, the man whom she condescends to marry—will have my sincerest sympathy, I can tell you." And he laughed again, loudly and long, shaking John's hand heartily all the while.

John at once felt drawn towards this great, deep-voiced man. There was something indescribably but irresistibly attractive about his broad, clean-shaven face, his quick grey eyes, his clear, resonant voice, and rich Irish accent. Moreover, he impressed one immediately as being, in one important respect, unlike all the other men in the room. Voice, speech, manner, all attested the cultivated gentleman.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, sir," said John spontaneously.

"And I can return the compliment, Mr. Smith, I

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assure you. I hope to get the chance of having a good chat with you by-and-by. From what Vicky tells me, we must have a great deal in common. Only, first of all, I must insist upon you taking something hot and stiff. Aunt Anna, how is the toddy getting on?"

Aunt Anna was busy cutting and squeezing lemons.

"I'm only waiting for the kettle," she replied. "Bobby, doesn't the kettle boil yet?"

Bobby threw away the end of the cigarette he had been smoking.

"'Twon't be long now, I guess," he answered, leaning forward to inspect it critically.

The opportunity was too good to be neglected, so he spat twice before subsiding again into his chair. By this time John felt as much repelled by the lanky, sallow, acrimonious, expectorating Chicagoan as he was attracted by the cordial, suave, laughter-loving Irishman. And he marvelled greatly to find two such dissimilar men associated on what seemed to be terms of family intimacy in such a company. What, he could not help asking himself, could be the tie of relationship, or, if none such existed, the bond of sympathy between them?

CHAPTER XIV

IN WHICH JOHN IS TREATED AS A BROTHER BY
THE EMBODIMENT OF ALL THE VIRTUES, AND
CLOSES A LIVELY EVENING BY COMING TO THE
ASSISTANCE OF A POLITE GENTLEMAN FROM
THE WEST

JOHN had now been duly presented to every member of the gathering, and was on the point of availing himself of the large easy-chair which Patrick had pushed towards the fire for his particular use, when the door was flung violently open, and another person strode into the room. John's heart stood still for a moment, and then began to pump away in the most erratic fashion; for the new-comer was the tall, raw-boned young fellow, with hatchet face, long, trailing moustaches, and great goggle-glasses, who had filled his life with nightmare horrors, not altogether banished by what Victorine had told him the other evening—the man whom, of all men in the world, he now most dreaded to meet, and whose unexpected absence from the party hitherto had been to him a source of lively satisfaction.

“Oh, Alexis, so you've come at last?” exclaimed Victorine, running forward, and taking both his hands in hers. “You're late, aren't you?”

“I couldn't get here an instant sooner,” answered

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Alexis gruffly, and without taking the slightest notice of the other occupants of the room. "It's a damned dirty night! You're lucky to have me here at all!"

"That's all right, my dear boy," the girl rejoined. "I was only afraid you might be detained altogether. John's here, you know!"

For the moment Alexis did not look as if he was particularly pleased by the receipt of this bit of information. However, the scowl on his brow disappeared almost instantly, and he stepped towards the fire with his right hand extended to the visitor.

"And so this is John Smith, is it?" he said. Though his voice was still harsh and metallic, the gruffness had pretty well gone from its tones. He scrutinised John closely. "Yes, I recognise you," he added, with a short laugh.

If John had felt extreme embarrassment in his introduction to Uncle Michael, you may judge what emotions he experienced now, as he stood exchanging the hand-clasp of good fellowship with the man who had been the lover of Victorine, and all but the assassin of himself. It gave him a creepy sensation up and down the spine to realise that he was now within striking distance of one who, if he still chose to do so, would scarcely scruple to take advantage of the situation.

"I want you two men to be the very best of friends," said Victorine, standing by, and looking from one to the other with a beaming face.

"Of course, we shall be the very best of friends," said Alexis, quite fiercely, in a tone, indeed, which suggested that he had been challenged on the point.

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"At least, it won't be my fault if we are not. John Smith, I admire you, and hope that I shall soon know you better. Damned unpleasant night, isn't it? Ah—ah—have a cigar?"

He drew a case from his pocket, and offered it with an air of defiance which would have been more appropriate if it had been a pistol. Certainly, said John to himself, a singular and rather alarming young man! He took a cigar, and proceeded to light it slowly and cautiously, half inclined to believe that it contained dynamite, and was intended to blow his head off. He was encouraged, however, by the fact that Victorine herself held the match for him, and that Alexis helped himself to a cigar from the same case.

John was struck then, and during the evening became more strongly impressed, by sundry peculiarities in the conduct of this Alexis, whom naturally he watched more critically than he did any of the others. Though neither so taciturn nor so disagreeable as Mr. Bobby, who rarely opened his mouth except to growl, he talked little, and then with manifest effort; and while he perhaps too conspicuously laid himself out to be cordial in all his dealings with the visitor, the result, strictly speaking, could hardly be reckoned a brilliant success. Moreover, his field of conversation was exceedingly limited. Save when directly questioned about other matters, he confined himself almost wholly to such topics as eating, drinking, smoking, and the weather, concerning which his opinions, though commonly expressed with quite unnecessary vigour of language, were in themselves neither very original nor very valuable. In a man

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who had been described as a paragon, a consummate type of sensibility, large-heartedness, and chivalrous idealism, all this was distinctly disappointing. Not, of course, that one has any right to expect that such a paragon, such a consummate type, shall naturally and inevitably possess all the external attributes of charming manners and suavity of behaviour to boot. A very slight knowledge of the world is sufficient to convince one that exceedingly good people are not always the best to look at, the pleasantest to meet, or the easiest to talk with. Still, after all that John had heard of the splendid qualities, the unselfishness, the quixotic loyalty and devotion of Alexis, he was fain to confess that the hero in the flesh was even more disenchanting than heroes in the flesh (wide as is their privilege in this respect) have any right to be; indeed, it was difficult to identify Victorine's Alexis in the guise of this unprepossessing young man, who, from time to time (generally, John came to fancy, on a glance from Victorine) broke his customary silence by uttering a commonplace, punctuated with an oath. Could the girl's love for this extraordinary creature have brought about a sort of transfiguration of him in her imagination? John hated to tolerate such a thought. But where otherwise could he hope to discover the key to the riddle? Finally, as a mere matter of detail, he presently became aware that this so-called young Pole—whose nationality had, in fact, been specially referred to in explanation of certain puzzling features of his character—spoke English with perfect ease and fluency, and without even such a delicate suggestion of foreign accent as rendered Victorine's own pronunciation so piquant. Taken

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by itself, this circumstance might have meant little or nothing; taken in conjunction with other matters, it certainly added to the mystery with which Alexis was surrounded.

John's cigar, though he puffed at it in rather a gingerly fashion, did not exhibit any signs of unpleasant behaviour, but proved, on the contrary, to be a very excellent weed.

"I can't do without my smoke, you know," Alexis remarked. "It's the only thing I've found yet that makes life worth living. It's an infernal piece of business anyway, even with tobacco"—Alexis did not say "infernal," though his epithet was practically synonymous with this; but we will take the liberty of editing the speeches—"and what it would be without tobacco, I should tremble even to guess. Sit down. If Bobby will only take his feet out of the way, you'll be able to feel the fire. By the way, I forgot to ask you, but perhaps you would have preferred a cigarette?"

"This cigar is very good, thank you," said John.

He took his place in the chair which Patrick had already pushed forward for him, feeling that Alexis had not so much invited, as commanded, him to be seated.

"Do you happen to have any cigarettes about you?" asked Mrs. Bobby. "It's no use troubling Bobby. He never thinks of anybody but himself. And his tobacco is out of the question, anyway."

Bobby remained perfectly indifferent to the conjugal criticism; while Alexis, without a word, threw a box of Russian cigarettes, which he took from his pocket, into the lady's lap. She did not thank him;

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but selected a cigarette, lighted it, and began to smoke, laying the box on the sofa by her side. John had never seen a woman smoke before, and if he did not now experience any special surprise, it was simply because so many extraordinary things were happening with such rapidity that his capacity for astonishment was fast being exhausted. No one else in the room took the slightest notice of the lady's doings.

By this time the kettle boiled, and Aunt Anna proceeded to make the grog. Victorine offered to hand the glasses round.

"No one ever mixed drink like auntie," she remarked confidentially to John, allowing her hand to rest just a moment on his shoulder. "Her touch amounts to genius."

"Put plenty of the craytur in John Smith's!" cried Patrick, who was watching the performance with intense interest, his head on one side. "He needs it after his exposure."

"And—for the same, or any other reason you can think of—put plenty in mine, too," said Alexis. "This damned weather is enough to give one his death of cold."

"Well, whisky's the thing," said Patrick cheerily. "Good whisky—and lots of it."

"You might have been raised in Kentucky," remarked Mrs. Bobby solemnly, blowing out a cloud of smoke.

John had now the extreme felicity of taking his glass from Victorine's own hand.

"I know you'll like it," she said. "You never tasted anything that approached it in your life."

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In a sense, this was quite true; for the first sip nearly took his head off.

"How's that?" asked Victorine triumphantly.

"Splendid!" said John, with a gasp.

The girl laughed as she perched herself jauntily on the arm of his chair.

"But where's your own glass?" he asked.

"Why, you don't suppose that *I* indulge in whisky and water, do you?" Again the light hand rested on his shoulder, but now she permitted it to remain there.

"I—I—well, I didn't know," he said, in some confusion.

"I never touch it, as a rule," she answered decisively. "But as this is a special occasion, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll take a little, just a very little, and for the sake of being sociable, out of your glass, John—that is, if you don't mind."

Mind! As if any man would mind! John thrilled with delight.

She took a tiny sip of the concoction, and handed the tumbler back to him with the quaintest and prettiest little grimace of disgust.

"Well, there's no accounting for tastes," she said.

"And yet you told me that I should like it—that I never tasted anything that approached it."

"That's what I say—there's no accounting for tastes. Just look at Patrick, and Bobby, and Alexis, and Mrs. Bob. They think that anything that dear old Aunt Anna mixes for them is the genuine nectar of the gods."

John quaffed again, and was more than ever convinced that, if this were really nectar, then the

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gods must like their beverages superhumanly strong. But inferring from the beatific expressions on the faces of his companions, and from the loud smacking of their lips, that it was an accepted tradition among them to wax enthusiastic over Aunt Anna's productions, he deemed it wise to keep his opinion to himself.

"It *is* good, awfully good," he said, measuring the quantity left in the glass, and calculating upon his ability to get through it all without unpleasant results. Then he sank his voice to a whisper: "Is Aunt Anna a Pole, too?"

"Well, practically so," Victorine replied. "Partly that, and partly Russian. Only she's lived a great many years in America, you know."

"Oh! And Mr. Patrick?"

She laughed in her airy way.

"*Mr.* Patrick! How awfully droll that sounds. No, he's not a Pole. He's Irish, of course."

John would have liked to pursue his investigations farther; but Patrick himself, at this point, broke in upon his confidences.

"Friends," he said, in his mellow and musical voice, "I want to propose a toast. Here's to our new friend, John Smith! I call him a friend because I believe we all of us already regard him as such." Murmurs of "Hear, hear!" and the clinking of glasses indicated the company's highly favourable reception of this sentiment. "John Smith has proved himself a gentleman. We know a gentleman when we see one, and are glad to take him at his true worth." ("Hear, hear!" and more clinking.) "There are not many such about, more's the pity; and this leads us

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to estimate the more truly the occasional and rare exceptions. John Smith is one of the occasional and rare—we grieve to say the only too occasional and rare—exceptions. Let us show him that we do not overlook or underrate his qualities, intellectual and moral. Ladies and gentlemen, with your kind permission”—Patrick now stood up, and with glass held elegantly aloft, bowed towards the visitor—“I propose the health of John Smith.”

The rest of the company rose, lifting their glasses and likewise bowing—all but Bobby, who half-turned, with a kind of surly smile, and Victorine, who retained her perch, laughing and clapping her hands. “John Smith! John Smith!” went round the room; and then “Prosit! Prosit!” Whereupon John, who now was on his feet, had to go through the elaborate ceremony of touching glasses with every member of the party—Victorine, of course, still excepted. Even Bobby so far unbent as to lean forward and take his share, though grudgingly enough, it must be confessed, in the mystic rite.

John was caught altogether unprepared. His face was scarlet; his lips trembled as he tried to speak.

“Go on, John; go on!” cried Victorine, looking up at him, with the merriest twinkle in her great grey eyes.

And poor John did his utmost to go on.

“I say,” he stammered, “this is awfully good of you, you know. It is really! I’m sure I’m tremendously glad to meet you all. I—I hope I shall get to know you all better, you know. I—I’m awfully grateful to you for your kindness. I—I—”

He might have floundered on in this absurd way

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indefinitely but for the applause which now fortunately brought him to a natural stop. "Bravo! bravo!" "Capital!" And from Victorine: "Good, John! why, you're quite an orator!" He sat down covered with confusion, and with a keen sense that his lame and commonplace sentences were in pitiful contrast with Patrick's fluent and graceful periods. But Victorine patted him so familiarly on the shoulder as he collapsed into his seat, and the rest were so cordial in their rather noisy encouragement, that his embarrassment rapidly passed away, and before long he was feeling perfectly at home.

Perhaps, however, the whisky and water had something to do with this. For under the benign influences of the cups which cheered by gentle inebriation, a most fraternal spirit soon pervaded the entire gathering. The chairs were brought into a large circle round the fire, the place of honour, in the centre of the group, being assigned to John. Patrick sat at his right, and Alexis at his left; while Victorine, at length consenting to find her elevated position uncomfortable, curled herself unceremoniously on the hearth-rug at her lover's feet, and even rested her arm on his knees. Then all tongues—if we except that of the taciturn Bobby, who retired meanwhile as far as possible into the chimney corner, growling at being obliged to move—were unloosed, and the conversation flowed fast and freely. What they talked about, John could not afterwards exactly remember (perhaps the whisky and water had something to do with his lack of clearness on that point, too); but he did recollect that it seemed very good talk—racy, voluble, and highly amusing. Probably, like most

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talk on similar social occasions, it did not linger long over any one subject, but played lightly about a dozen different themes in as many minutes, shifting and changing at a chance word, as various threads of interest were taken up and dropped.

Presently, to John's horror, the glasses were replenished ; after which the voices grew louder, and the laughter more boisterous. His own potations, as he was well aware, were by this time having an effect upon him ; he found himself chattering away to everybody with unprecedented glibness, and giggling rather aimlessly when for the moment he had nothing more to say. He even slapped Patrick on the back in the most familiar fashion, and addressed Alexis—yes, actually addressed Alexis—as “ol' man.” It is true that he experienced a sudden twinge of conscience when he had done this, and became preternaturally grave ; but Victorine's laughing eyes, turned up to his own, brought him reassurance. By this time, indeed, the girl had come to seem the only real thing in the room to him. Uncle Michael, Aunt Anna, Bobby, and the rest of them, were now as so many half-realised figures in some fantastic dream ; their voices came to him from ever so far away ; their faces glimmered through a tremulous haze. But Victorine, thank Heaven ! was still of the stuff of the genuine human world. Coiled close against him on the rug, in an attitude of kittenish ease and grace, she had gradually allowed herself to subside against him for support. Her head was propped upon one hand, her elbow was upon his knee ; he felt an unspeakable delight in bearing her weight, and in watching the glint of the gas-light upon her soft

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brown hair. Yes; she was real and tangible, and that was enough. If only he might claim that fair, dear creature as his own, what would it matter to him if everybody else and everything else should vanish as by the snapping of a conjuror's spell?

"Don't you sing, John Smith?" asked Aunt Anna suddenly.

Startled by the question which brought him suddenly out of his dream, John could only protest that vocal music had never been one of his accomplishments. He did not think it necessary to confess that, in years gone by, he had been one of a small choir in the chapel of his mother's choice.

"Then you're just like me," Alexis remarked, now, as at other times, with the evident purpose of saying something friendly. "I don't know one note of music from another. My friends ought to be grateful for that mercy, at any rate. Have a cigarette!"

"Patrick is always ready," said Victorine. "Sing to us, Pat, there's a good boy."

Pat cleared his throat, arranged his collar, and smiled expressively on the company.

"Have you any particular choice?" he inquired.

It was the unanimous opinion that the choice should be left to Pat. Whereupon that gentleman, without more ado, threw himself back in his chair, and began to sing in a voice so true and tender that every chord in John's nature seemed to vibrate in response. He had never heard any singing like it before—at once so spontaneous, so simple, so wonderfully effective. He did not recognise the song, which was some old-fashioned little Irish ditty telling of the parting of a young soldier from his bride, but the first stanza

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brought the tears to his eyes, and thenceforth he listened with quivering lip. When Pat ceased, he noticed that no one broke the silence.

Then Victorine looked up at him, and her eyes, too, were moist. She did not speak, but held her hand towards him, and when he took it, she pressed his own tightly. He leaned down till his face was close to hers.

"How beautiful!" he whispered.

"Yes," she murmured, and her voice was so low that he hardly caught the words; "yes, very beautiful! And it means so much, because after all it gives part of the real tragedy of life. Loving—parting—joy—duty—most of what we suffer is there!"

John did not a bit understand her at the time. He took what she said as only another expression of her capricious changefulness of mood and feeling. Afterwards he came, as he thought, to realise why she spoke as she did.

Meanwhile Patrick himself, having stirred his grog quite ferociously, took a long, steady drink, and put down the glass, smacking his lips.

"Good Lord! you're not going to sing again, are you?" growled Bobby from the chimney-corner.

Pat laughed in his merry way.

"As you *are* so pressing—" he began.

"Rats!" said Bobby. "All I ask is, that if you must favour the company, you give us something to clear the air of all this confounded sentimentalism. You are the greatest chap I ever saw for the snuffles. I don't see the fun of it myself!"

"Bobby makes it a point of honour never to see

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the fun of anything that other people enjoy," remarked Mrs. Bobby casually, and she lighted a fresh cigarette.

"I must say," observed Alexis, "that I've never been able to understand why art should everlastingly be used to perpetuate just the very things in life it might help us to forget, at anyrate for a little while. The only wisdom of life consists in cheating ourselves about it. Art ought to help us in our self-deception. If it doesn't cheat us, we don't want it. It can have no other purpose."

"Lucid as usual, Alexis," said Mrs. Bobby.

"As dogmatic as ever," added Victorine.

"Well," said Patrick, "I won't discuss æsthetics with Alexis, or anything else, for that matter, nor will I try to satisfy Bobby—because his only satisfaction lies in feeling dissatisfied. But if the rest of you want something out of the lachrymose line, how do you like this? Only, you must all join in the chorus."

This was a rattling, nonsensical ballad of one Thomson and his "old grey mule"—a beast which seemed to indulge in manifold eccentricities of behaviour. Much was made, in particular, of his dietetic vagaries, and especially of his marked predilection for tomato cans, and other similar delicacies. And at the close of every stanza came the idiotic refrain, in which all the company took part with boisterous hilarity:

"And the mule he said, Hee-haw,
Hee-haw, hee-haw, hee-haw,
Hee-haw, hee-haw, hee-haw, hee-haw,
When they combed him down with a rake!"

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This performance gave the liveliest satisfaction. Only when Victorine asked Alexis if it entirely fulfilled his idea of the aims and purposes of art, that gentleman saw fit to ignore the question. Bobby's judgment was conveyed by a grunt.

It was all very jolly, and John had got to feel vastly at home with his newly-made friends, whose very peculiarities, for the time being at least, seemed natural as well as interesting. But it is a familiar fact, of which we must leave the optimist to make what he can, that the moments fly the faster the more we desire to have them stay; and the sound of a church clock somewhere near by booming in upon the laughter which followed one of Patrick's excellent Irish stories, warned our young man that the hour of departure had arrived—all too soon.

"I'm awfully sorry I have to go," he said, jumping to his feet. "I hate to break up the party. I—I've had the jolliest evening I ever had in my life. 'Pon my word, I have."

"I hope there are many more such evenings in store for us all," said Aunt Anna heartily.

This sentiment was received with a general murmur of approval.

"You must come again fery soon, *hein!*" said Uncle Michael, laying his great hand heavily on John's shoulder. And John did not even wince.

"Yes, yes, we must see lots of you," said Alexis. "We shall reckon you as one of us—mark you, one of us!" He waxed quite fierce in giving expression to this kindly thought; but then it was clearly a habit of his to be fierce about everything.

"I'm sure it's awfully kind of you," John stam-

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mered. All this manifestation of friendliness, he felt, was rather embarrassing—at any rate, to an Englishman. Foreigners were more given to that kind of thing.

“Not a bit—not a bit!” exclaimed the jovial Patrick. “We shall reckon you as one of us, John Smith, because we’ve taken a fancy to you—because we know a gentleman when we meet one—”

Here Bobby spat into the fire.

“Because you are a man of our own sort,” said Mrs. Bobby.

“And because you were goot to de leetle girl,” said Uncle Michael. “Goot-bye, John Smit!”

Then John had to shake hands all round. Bobby barely condescended to acknowledge him with the momentary touch of three clammy fingers; but as for the others, if vigour of grip gives any trustworthy measure of warmth of feeling, then they must all have felt very warmly towards him indeed. By the time he had made the round, his hand ached as if all the bones had been mashed together.

“Good-bye, John Smith, good-bye!” “You must come again soon, mind!” “We are delighted to know you!”—with some such cordial phrase was every fresh grasp accompanied. But it was reserved for Alexis to utter the final word.

“John Smith,” and his eyes seemed to light up more ferociously than ever behind his big goggle-glasses, “from this time on I regard you as a brother—mark you, as a brother!”

Anxious as John was to enter to the full into the spirit of the occasion, he could only murmur

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incoherently in reply to this speech. Fortunately, Patrick came to the rescue.

“Now, a drop of something hot and stiff to keep out the cold—”

But John was firm.

And so the wonderful evening had come to an end. No—not quite to an end; for down in the dark passage something occurred that made his heart beat with delirious joy as the front door closed behind him, and he started out on his dreary homeward way. Never mind exactly what passed between himself and Victorine during their long, whispered colloquy beside that colossal American trunk. I don't suppose what they said to one another would make very interesting reading even if I took the space necessary to set it down. But how good it was to think about! How delightful to realise that he had actually found courage to tell her right out that he loved her, and that she had more than half confessed that she loved him in return. It seemed to him that he could still feel the touch of her little soft hands as she buttoned his coat collar for him across his throat, telling him to be very careful of the damp; that her warm breath was still on his cheek; and his blood was all a-tingle from the memory of those intoxicating moments when he had held her in his passionate embrace, and their lips had closed together in one long lover's kiss.

Do you suppose that he minded the wind that cut like an knife, and the rain that beat against his face? Not a whit! He had passed through the golden gates of Paradise, and, head down to meet the storm, strode rapidly on, making his way by mere blind

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instinct, and knowing and caring nothing for drenched pavements and dismal, deserted streets. Only—what malicious spirit of evil was it that suddenly slipped the thought into his mind, to play havoc there with all his visions of future bliss?—only, why had he again missed his opportunity of finding out the secret of Penny Whistle?

“Damn!” said John. He said it aloud, too, and astonishment at the explosion brought him to a stand-still.

“I beg your pardon!”

Turning sharply round, he found himself face to face with a gentleman who had come up behind him unperceived. He was tightly muffled up in a mackintosh coat, and carried an umbrella well down over his head, but John could see that he was an elderly man, with close-cut grey side-whiskers, fresh pink cheeks, and clean-shaven upper lip and chin.

“I beg your pardon!” the stranger repeated, and his tone and manner were extremely urbane and kindly; “but I am afraid that I’ve missed my way, and—as there does not seem to be any policeman about—I thought you might perhaps help me.”

“Of course, if I can,” said John. “Where d’you want to go?” He spoke as politely as he could, but really, under the circumstances, he could not help resenting the gentleman’s interference a little.

“King’s Cross Station,” was the reply.

“Oh, that’s close by here,” said John, “and that’s where I’m bound for. You may as well come with me. I’ll show you the way, if you don’t mind.”

“You are very kind—very kind, indeed. I wouldn’t for the world wish to trouble you—” The gentleman

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appeared to be quite pained at the notion of inflicting himself upon John, and as they started off together, he was profuse in apologies and explanations. He knew so little about London; was up from the West of England on business only; had always found the Metropolitan Railway service so exceedingly confusing—of course, he begged pardon—to a mere stranger. Probably his kind friend in need was himself a resident of London?

“Born and bred here,” said John.

Ah, that was different, of course! Would not his kind friend in need share his umbrella? No thanks necessary. All the thanks were on the other side. Really, John thought him one of the most gentlemanly people he had ever met.

“Terrible night!” said John, as they walked on side by side.

“Indeed, yes, a very unpleasant night—one might, in fact, say an extremely disagreeable night. One would, I believe, be justified in putting the case as strongly as that.”

John, who was conscious of having put the case more strongly than that, thought one would certainly be justified in so doing.

“It is to be hoped that you have not very far to go,” said the gentleman, in a tone of deep solicitation.

“To Hammersmith.”

“Hammersmith! Ah, the name is familiar! But you must excuse me—as a stranger, you understand—if it gives me no very clear idea of distance and location.”

John gave his companion a general statement both of the whereabouts of Hammersmith and of the time

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it would probably take him to reach it, and received many thanks for the information. What possible interest it could have for the gentleman from the West, however, was not apparent. By this time John began to think that if courtesy was one of his characteristics, curiosity was another.

"This is a long way to come on business," the gentleman went on.

"Oh, I wasn't here on business. I have friends living in this neighbourhood."

"Friends! ah, yes, that's quite another matter; I think we may say that that is quite another matter. One cares little for weather and distance where friendship is concerned." (Weather and distance, indeed! John thought of Victorine, and smiled.) "None the less—excuse me—you are in business, I suppose?"

"Certainly."

"The law, probably. You—you won't mind my venturing to say so, I hope—but you look like a lawyer."

"Do I?" said John, wondering what might be the distinguishing marks of the legal profession. "Well, it happens that I'm not a lawyer. I'm engaged in the shipping business."

"In the shipping business? Really! Now that is very odd—very odd and very interesting. I have relatives in that business myself—in Bristol. May I take the liberty of inquiring the name of the firm in which you are a partner?"

John was obliged to laugh outright.

"My goodness, I'm not a partner in any firm," he replied. "That's not my luck. I'm just a clerk,

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you know. Werry's the governor's name — Werry & Co."

"A very good house—a very good house indeed!" said the strange gentleman emphatically. "I have frequently heard the name through my relatives. Let me see, let me see; their place of business is somewhere in the neighbourhood of—of—pardon me, but I am, as you are aware, unfamiliar with London, and the precise locality escapes me."

"St. Mary Axe," said John, "if you know where that is."

"Ah, yes, St. Mary Axe; the address comes back to me at once, now you mention it, though positively I don't know that I am very much the wiser," and the gentleman laughed quite gaily; and John, who was highly amused by his little oddities, joined in his mirth, at the same time doing his best to put him right in regard to this new question of metropolitan topography.

"And here's King's Cross Station," he added. "Which way do you want to go?"

It turned out that the gentleman from the West wanted to go to the Mansion House.

"Then I'm awfully sorry that I must wish you good-night," said John. "Our roads part here, for mine takes me in the opposite direction, you see."

The suave stranger was filled with regret.

"Then good-night, my dear sir, if it must be so," he said. "I am afraid I have been a great deal of trouble to you. I thank you very much, very much indeed, for your kindness."

"Not at all," said John, in some alarm lest his companion's volubility might cause him to miss his train.

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"You have rendered me a great service—you must permit me to put it in that way ; and I thank you." The speaker waved a kid-gloved hand. "The world is not nearly as large as we are apt to imagine—not nearly as large. Perhaps we may meet again—who can tell? Let us hope so."

"I'm sure I hope we may," said John. "Excuse me, but there's my train. Good-night!"

Five minutes later, he was alone in a third-class compartment on the Underground, and was wrapped in blissful memories of Victorine. He had chuckled over the peculiar mannerisms of the excessively polite elderly gentleman, to whom he had played the good Samaritan, and had dismissed him altogether from his mind. As for their ever meeting again—that was something to which he did not give a second thought. Chance acquaintances constantly talk in that fashion, and even exchange cards and promise visits ; but half the time they are not really in earnest when they do so. And for John, who had no reason in the world to attach the slightest importance to the recent interview, the gentleman from the West was nothing more than a figure who had accidentally come into his life for a moment, to drop out of it again, leaving no trace behind. Little did he imagine that he was indeed destined to meet him again, and under circumstances which would stamp the minutest details of their past conversation indelibly upon his memory.

CHAPTER XV

IN WHICH JOHN GETS DEEPER AND DEEPER IN LOVE

THE world is born anew for every one of us ; and the lover, in all the raptures of his virgin romance, must be forgiven if he never pauses to consider that a story which seems original with him has been told over and over again, who shall say how many millions of times, since "Adam first embraced his Eve in happy hour." And surely no one but a confirmed cynic would wish it otherwise. Life may not be exactly a brilliant success, even as it is. The more grateful ought we to be, then, that the wisdom accumulated by ages of experience, though it brings disenchantment to humanity in the mass, does not altogether destroy the poetry of the personal lot. "The planet is old," sang the cheery Frenchman, "but still the young girl is young !"

For several weeks after that memorable evening in Quemby Court, John Smith went through the monotonous routine of his daily existence like a man under the potent influence of some magic draught. Life for him had undergone a complete and miraculous transformation. Eating and sleeping, shorthand notes and bills of lading, trains and omnibuses, work and leisure, were now absurdly trivial accidents of his

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experience. The world contained only one vital and certain fact—the fact of Love. Everything else was not only unimportant, but unreal. It was amusing to see how seriously people concerned themselves about matters which, properly viewed, could have no possible significance—such as politics and the money-market. But then the men whom he everywhere saw reading their newspapers or discussing stocks were merely shadows in a shadow-world. They might vanish one and all into thin air, and he would not be surprised, nor would he miss them. Life consisted of Victorine.

Of course, his mother and Ben Chadwick noticed—for it required no great keenness of observation to do so—the peculiar light in John's eye, the glow in his cheeks, the clear ring of his voice, the general exaltation which marked his manner and speech. Never had Mrs. Smith seen her son so alert and buoyant. She had long, as we know, been anxious about him, worrying herself into sleeplessness and constant nervous headaches over his feverish cold, his lack of appetite, his mental depression and irritability. And now a heavy weight had been taken off the good woman's mind. It is true that there were things about his conduct still which she was at a loss to understand. He was subject to strange fits of abstraction ; sometimes talked disjointedly ; often made unexpected and inappropriate answers to even the simplest questions ; ate and drank capriciously, and without appearing to discriminate very closely between mutton and beef, coffee and tea. But surely, though these peculiarities might cause her occasionally a few minutes' disquietude, there could be no ground for alarm while the young man's step was so jaunty,

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his smile so quick and responsive. John was certainly better—very much better. This one fact sufficed. Mrs. Smith did not try to account for the remarkable change. She merely noted that the old languor and apathy had given place to freshened energy and interest in things. She merely noted this, and was satisfied.

Not so Ben. He, too, observed the change, but was by no means satisfied. He regarded John's behaviour as distinctly unnatural. His present elation was every bit as bad as his former dejection had been. Something had been wrong then; something, Ben was convinced, was wrong, seriously wrong, now. Ben shook his head in despair. What could be the cause of all the trouble? He could only guess; and his guessing led him to nothing but the vaguest of vague suspicions that in some way those "foreigners and their gal" must be at the bottom of it.

He could only guess, because, to his genuine grief, he found John more and more inaccessible. With the stolid, canine kind of fidelity which characterised the poor fellow, he made his regular calls at Mrs. Smith's house, but on each successive occasion he came away as wise as he went. Half the time John was not at home, and he had the pleasure of sitting for fifteen or twenty minutes in Mrs. Smith's parlour watching her at her everlasting needlework. It was not precisely exhilarating, and it was not in the least what Ben wanted; but he had a kindly feeling for his friend's mother, and, apart from that, he was one of those people who, when they once get into a room, have the greatest difficulty in the world in getting out of it again.

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"John's out this evening, Mr. Chadwick," Mrs. Smith would say.

Then Ben would express disappointment ; murmur that it didn't matter, as he only "dropped round," having nothing particular to do ; and finish up with a casual remark to the effect that John seemed to be out a good deal just now.

If Ben had any idea that this suggestion might possibly lead to fruitful conversation, he was always doomed to disenchantment. Mrs. Smith, in her guileless fashion, evidently took her son's frequent absences as a matter of course. She would explain at great length that, owing to extreme pressure of business, John had often to stay overtime at the office ; that he was really working very hard indeed, but that she didn't mind that so long as he remained well. Whereupon would follow much maternal soliloquy upon the large and pregnant theme of John's health ; which, she was glad to say, had lately improved so wonderfully ; with some discussion of her recent anxiety on his behalf ; and appropriate reminiscences of various coughs, colds, aches and pains from which he had suffered from childhood up. Once drawn into this conversational current, Ben was fain to realise that the only way of escape lay in departure ; and after sundry ineffectual attempts, he would finally succeed in working his way out into the street.

"John will be so sorry not to have seen you, Mr. Chadwick," Mrs. Smith would observe, wishing him good-bye. "You'll come again soon, won't you ?"

Then Ben would promise to come again very soon,

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and swear softly to himself as soon as the front door was closed upon him.

Yes, there was something wrong—seriously wrong. He was sure of it, though the old woman did not seem to have the slightest inkling of any trouble.

Nor were things much better on the other occasions when Ben was lucky enough to find John at home. Mr. Chadwick, as we are aware, was not endowed with great sensibility or power of perception; but he knew enough, as he told himself over and over again, to realise that his friend was not glad to see him, and was thoroughly ill at ease in his presence. And this made Ben, in his turn, completely uncomfortable. Their intercourse thus lacked the old spontaneity of long and perfect intimacy, and even by degrees became awkward and strained. A barrier of some sort had come between them. Formerly it had been John's regular custom to take Ben up to his bedroom—the little "den" where we first discovered them together—for John, as we remember, seldom smoked elsewhere in the house, at all events till his mother had retired for the night. He would light a bit of fire in the little grate, and, sitting one on each side of its cheerful blaze, the two young men would suck their pipes in complete comfort till all the room was blue, chatting in aimless fashion as long as they had anything to talk about; or, when the spirit ceased to move them, indulging in the silence which is the special and peculiar privilege of friendship. What happy evenings they had been! Ben thought of them with a pang. For John rarely took him upstairs now; under pretext that it was warmer and pleasanter in the sitting-

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room, he kept him in Mrs. Smith's company. Ben saw through the subterfuge. It was evident enough to him that John wanted, so far as possible, to avoid a *tête-à-tête*; and when Mrs. Smith had gathered up her miscellaneous garments, and needles and reels of cotton, and had gone to bed, Ben was well enough aware that his friend was not only sorry they were thus left alone, but was fully determined that he, Ben, should gain no advantage from the fact. Again and again he did his utmost to get John into his power, and to surprise and capture his secret (for secret he knew there was), now by manœuvring, and now by direct assault; but the result was always discomfiture. In one or another way, John always contrived to prevent the conversation from turning in the direction of intimately personal themes. Sometimes he was silent and grumpy; more often he would talk fast and feverishly about all sorts of indifferent topics—the abominable weather, the approach of Christmas, the peculiarities of his mother's charwoman, the latest dancer at the Gaiety; a totally unimportant occurrence at the office; and, do what he would, Ben was baffled. One thing only became, with every fresh evening passed in this unsatisfactory fashion, increasingly clear to him: at the most distant and incidental allusion on his part to the foreigners, or to any matter remotely connected with them, John instantly took fright. That one subject was evidently fatal. Wherefore, Ben sapiently inferred that with that one subject the present mystery of John's conduct was in some inexplicable manner bound up.

Surely enough, Mr. Chadwick had every reason to

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be worried about his friend. For the first time in his life, he of the easy conscience and perfect digestion knew what it was to lie awake at night.

Meanwhile, if John Smith, as we see, had made up his mind to keep his own counsel, he had ample grounds for so doing. To begin with, under any circumstances, it would be no easy thing for him to go to his mother or Ben, and confess his love for Victorine, when, of course, he would have at the same time to lay bare the events which had brought them together. He was perfectly frank with himself in admitting a serious doubt as to whether Mrs. Smith would be completely satisfied with the daughter-in-law he had chosen for her, and still more whether she would take quite kindly to the young lady's friends. Anyone who did not at once fall in love with Victorine, anyone who did not at first sight regard her as the most beautiful, the most captivating, the sweetest and dearest of girls, was indeed to be pitied for blindness and insensibility; but this did not alter the fact that, face to face with Victorine, Mrs. Smith was very likely to show herself both blind and insensible. He could imagine his mother cross-examining him in true motherly fashion as to what he really knew of the girl, her relatives, up-bringing, and—good heavens!—her religious views and church affiliations. "Let me see—just how did you meet her, John? Have you ever had any talk with her about her purposes in life? Do you think she can cook and sew well?—because, you know, John, it doesn't seem to me that any girl is fit to be a man's wife who can't give him a good chop, and fasten on his buttons for him. What was her father's business,

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John? I think you said he was dead. She is living with her uncle and aunt, is she? Foreigners—h'm! And—I may have forgotten—but did you mention her family name?"

That would be, John foresaw, the style of thing; and do we wonder that he should flinch at the prospects of such an ordeal? And then, in fancy, he went through his own part of the performance, with the liveliest sense of the change which would come over Mrs. Smith's face as he told her—not everything, but just what he would be obliged to tell her—about his first meeting with Victorine, the incidents of his courtship, the manner of her life in Quemby Court; closing, as he would be forced to do, with the damaging admission that he was not absolutely certain of her American father's identity, but that she seemed, for no reason that he could assign, to go under the name of her maternal uncle, Michael, which was—it could not, of course, be helped, but it was certainly calculated to shock respectable prejudices—nothing less than Goszczynski.

By the time John reached this critical point in the rehearsal, he would find himself growing very hot all over. No, it wouldn't do—it wouldn't do at all! Sooner or later, of course, the confession would have to be made; but it would be later rather than sooner.

Then, as he knew, things would be quite as disagreeable when the time came to confide in Ben. Concerning that gentleman's judgment no possible doubt could be entertained. He, too, would be afflicted with blindness and insensibility; and his vigorously expressed opinions of John's own folly in

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getting himself mixed up with a lot of people, who, to put the matter mildly, were distinctly queer, would be so much the more unpalatable because they would simply bring to the surface and define the doubts and questions which the lover himself strove most valiantly to silence, but which, at most inopportune seasons, would persist in making themselves heard. How would he ever endure Ben's heavy, Philistine touch upon his delicately-woven romance? How resist the attack of his stolid common-sense? No, no! Once more, it wouldn't do—it wouldn't do at all! Sooner or later, again, Ben, too, would have to be told all about it; but the evil day must still be put off as long as possible.

But while a wholesome dread of his mother and Ben Chadwick would thus have sufficed of itself to keep his mouth shut, John had another and even weightier reason for his policy of silence. Victorine herself had begged him to keep their relationship a secret for the present.

"Unless, John dear," she said, "you feel that you really must tell your mother at once—"

"Not at all, not at all!" answered John readily. "I want to do exactly what you wish about it, Victorine."

"Then just for a little while—not for long, John; but just a little while I would rather we kept it entirely to ourselves. Aunt Anna thinks it would be better, and I think so, too. There is no need to be in a hurry—"

"Certainly not," said John decisively; "so long as—as—"

"So long as what, dear?"

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"As we—we understand all about it ourselves, you know."

"You foolish boy! As if there is any chance for doubt about that!"

"All right, then, darling! I will do whatever you feel is for the best. For your sake I would do anything."

"Are you sure of that, John? Are you certain that, come what may, and whatever I might ask you to do for me, you would never demur, never hesitate—"

"Do you doubt me, Victorine?" cried the enamoured one explosively. "I only ask you to test my love in any way you like, and . . ."

At which point the girl, with a merry laugh, threw her arms round John's neck, and the conversation became too incoherent to be worth reporting.

Without any conscious intention of conveying a false impression, John was most likely glad enough to leave Victorine with the idea that it was only in obedience to her wishes that he had promised not, for the time being, to open his heart to anyone, even to his mother. It even gave him a certain thrill of satisfaction to fancy that in holding his tongue he was not so much following his own cowardly impulses as bowing unquestioningly to his mistress's commands. But the perfect coincidence of his own impulses and her commands led to one rather unfortunate result. It blinded him to what would otherwise have struck him as an element of caprice in the girl's behaviour. Why did she agree with Aunt Anna, whose opinion she seemed to quote as authoritative, in thinking it better that their relation-

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ship should just for the present be kept to themselves? What reason could they have for avoiding disclosure? But for his own absolute agreement with Aunt Anna, such questions would undoubtedly have forced themselves upon him. As it was, he never even thought of asking Victorine for an explanation of her desire for temporary secrecy.

The scrap of conversation just quoted may be taken to indicate that matters between John and his charmer had now assumed a fairly settled character. To speak by the letter, their agreement was, indeed, of the nature rather of what is commonly called an "understanding" than of a regular hard-and-fast engagement. The girl had never yet, in so many words, promised to be his wife, nor had anything ever been said about their prospective marriage to or by her friends. Doubtless John would presently have found this a trifle unsatisfactory, and would have been restless to have his own position more clearly defined. But for the time being, immediate bliss was all that he asked or cared for. If Victorine had never formally yielded herself to him, he could comfort himself with the assurance that as between them, under the circumstances, there was no need of formality. To all intents and purposes she had accepted his suit. Was not that enough? And as for Uncle Michael, Aunt Anna, and the rest of the household, though they never referred to his footing in their circle, they always welcomed him most cordially, treated him with marked attention, and by the mere fact that they often left him alone with Victorine, gave evidence that they acknowledged him as her lover.

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And what delicious hours those were, which, evening after evening, John Smith was privileged to spend in that dingy, poorly-furnished, ill-smelling upper room in Quemby Court!—hours to be recalled in after years with a lump in the throat and a fierce wringing of the heart! Generally, when he reached the house, there were half-a-dozen or so men and women gathered about the table, over their whisky and tobacco; and little by little, John came in this way to know a good many other strange people besides those to whom he had first been introduced. They were, he was forced to admit, a motley set; foreigners, for the most part; of varying ages and styles; but all more or less shaggy, untidy, eccentric in speech, and redolent of spirits and smoke. Whenever he found a stranger in the group, he was at once presented as a habitué of the house, and a special friend of Victorine; whereupon, the said stranger never failed to express in vigorous, if sometimes rather uncertain English, his peculiar pleasure in meeting a man of whom he had already heard so much, and to invite him to drink on the spot. They were all very familiar with one another, helped themselves to one another's cigarettes and tobacco without so much as a "Thank you," and called Victorine "Vicky" or "Vick," with a freedom which John did not by any means approve of. His original acquaintances were rather irregular in their attendance, Bobby, in particular, seldom turning up, if at all, till late in the evening, when he was always in the very gruffest of humours. But Aunt Anna, and perhaps one or two of the others, were usually on hand. On his arrival, John frequently discovered them in animated

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discussion, and more than once he was driven to infer from their heightened voices and excited gesticulation, and from the fact that everybody was talking at once and nobody listening to what the others said, that such discussion was not exactly as amicable as might be desired. But inasmuch as they invariably at such times employed a foreign tongue, he was quite in the dark as to the cause of their misunderstandings, while immediately upon his appearance in their midst they always dropped into English—perhaps, he thought, out of politeness to himself—and fell to chatting about the weather or the day's occurrences. Now and then he noticed a newspaper spread out across the table. But this, too, was in an unknown language, and was quickly folded up, and pocketed by someone of the gathering.

Despite his preoccupation with more important matters, John's curiosity was naturally aroused by these proceedings, and once he asked Victorine what in the world it was that seemed to interest her friends so keenly.

The girl laughed.

"What always does interest a lot of men when they get together?" she inquired, with a toss of the head, as if to suggest that the thing was of no great importance.

"But there are women here, too," John reminded her.

"Oh, women are often as bad—especially American women."

"You mean politics?"

"No, not politics, John; business!"

John expressed some surprise.

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"I didn't think they looked and talked precisely like business people."

"Perhaps not like the business people you know, John; but they are all interested in foreign stocks and securities, and—and that sort of thing. They get frightfully excited over it all, as you can see for yourself; and sometimes, when it becomes a question of selling or not selling, they have most tremendous rows. It's awfully amusing; I wish you could understand what they say. You'd have the greatest fun in the world in listening to them swear at one another."

John privately thought that this was an odd way of conducting financial discussions, but he merely remarked that it must be very funny.

"You bet your life it is, as Mrs. Bobby would say, in the high style of Chicago. It is *very* funny. Only there's a serious side to it all as well."

"There generally is a serious side to things where money's concerned," remarked John, with the conviction born of experience. This was thrown out as a joke. But Victorine did not even smile.

"It's serious for me," she said; "perhaps very serious. I'll tell you all about it some day, John; not now. It's a long story, and complicated, and—and there are reasons why I mustn't go into it without Uncle Michael's permission. But my father, when he died, left me a little fortune, and it's all invested in some of these foreign securities; and Uncle Michael's my trustee, and is looking after things for me; and a cousin of his has been managing some of my affairs for him in Paris, and now we are afraid that he has been dishonest, and perhaps

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has wasted the money, or turned it to his own use. We don't know yet—we may get some news about it almost any day. But doesn't it seem odd?—you may be making love to an heiress, John, or to an absolutely penniless girl, who will have to go out sewing, maybe, to earn her living.”

What John said and did in reply to this statement does not need to be set down. It was what any properly constituted young man would have said and done under the circumstances.

“Yes, dear, that's all very well, I know,” Victorine continued, disengaging herself. “Bread and cheese and kisses would satisfy me completely; but for your sake, I'd rather have a little gold in my purse. However, you can see how terribly worried poor Uncle Michael is about the whole affair. He doesn't like me to talk about it yet; and anyway, it's all so mixed up that I couldn't give you any real idea of the business if I tried. Some day you will have the whole story from uncle himself, and you will be able to understand it. I can't. It makes my head spin.”

John's own head was in something of a whirl; but finding that Victorine really did not seem to want to pursue the matter farther for the present, he quietly changed the subject of conversation. And the following evening, when he surprised Uncle Michael, Mrs. Bobby, Alexis, and a couple of strangers in the midst of a heated wrangle, in which a glass of whisky had been thrown on to the floor and smashed, he began to wonder in what way the altercation might possibly bear upon Victorine's fortune, and to wish that her money was safely

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invested in some conservative English Savings Bank or decently conducted Building Society.

Intensely interested as they all were in funds and stocks, however, they were none the less ready, as we have noted, with one accord to lay business affairs aside as soon as John came into the room. Leaving Bobby out of the question, with whom, week after week, he hardly exchanged a word, and whose manner exhibited no signs of mollification, he found them all genial and chatty, his newly-made acquaintances no less than those he had first met, and whom by this time he had come to look upon as personal friends of long standing. They were an easy-going, Bohemian lot, full of joke and anecdote, and sometimes, according to John's notions, alarmingly free in their talk; they all, men and women alike, drank without measure, and smoked in proportion; but astonishingly unconventional as were their standards of behaviour, they proved themselves amusing companions for a social hour. Their very eccentricities, when once he grew accustomed to them, were to John an unending source of pleasure and surprise; and as his first feelings of strangeness and misgiving wore rapidly away, he found himself getting on with them every bit as well as with the redoubtable Robert Simpson and his kind. His special favourite was Patrick, who captivated him by his high spirits and racy Irish wit, and completely won his heart by his sunny temper and constant thoughtfulness in little things. "There was never a better fellow in this world," he would say enthusiastically almost every evening to Victorine; and in this judgment the girl as enthusiastically concurred. "The more

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you come to know him, the more you will like him," she would add. After Patrick, John was most thoroughly at home with Aunt Anna and Uncle Michael. The good fat woman had nothing in the least attractive about her, it is true; her eternal wheezing sometimes made him nervous, her love of tawdry finery and jewels seemed positively vulgar; she was brusque in manner, and, he thought, stupid; but she looked after his creature comforts with almost motherly solicitude, and appeared to take a certain feminine interest in the progress of affairs between Victorine and himself. As for Uncle Michael, John was astonished to discover how soon he managed to forget the extremely unpleasant nature of their early associations; for now, without the slightest feeling of trepidation, he would spend many a cosy half-hour with him in the friendliest fireside chat. What endeared him above all things else to the man who had once cherished designs against his life was that he seemed never to tire of talking about his "tear leetle girl." He told John over and over again how he had watched and cared for her as a tiny motherless child; how his heart had been well-nigh broken when the physicians in Paris had hinted that she was going to die; how she had been as a daughter to him in his many wanderings about the world; and how, as she grew up, she had responded to his paternal affection with all the warmth of an only child's love. "Oh, she is goot, zo goot! Mine frient, I cannot tell you how goot she is!" And John listened, deeply moved, drinking in all these tender reminiscences with low murmurs of approval, and always anxious for more. At first, it was hard for him to make out more than a

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third or so of what Michael was saying, but little by little his ear became accustomed to the broken speech and contorted sentences, and he followed without difficulty, except, indeed, when his companion took to quoting poetry, which he sometimes did, apparently as a relief to his pent-up emotions. Shakespeare, according to his own statement, was his favourite author, and from Shakespeare he would occasionally (especially when primed with a couple of glasses of whisky and water) reel off lengthy passages in a loud voice, and with many gestures. But John was never very clear as to what they were about, or how they were connected, if at all, with the immediate topic of their conversation.

We have said that, with the exception of Bobby, John found all the Quemby Court people genial and chatty ; but this needs modification, for it takes no due stock of Alexis. Of all his acquaintances, the young Pole (if Pole indeed he were) puzzled him most. He did his utmost to like him, because Victorine expressed herself as anxious that the two should be the closest of friends, and because he felt that he ought, by self-compulsion if necessary, to like a man of such fine character and chivalrous ideals. But with the best intentions in the world, he simply could not bring himself to like him ; nor could he even feel the confidence in him that he felt in the others. *They* were odd enough, in all conscience ; but their oddness did not impress him seriously, and while he was frequently amused, he was never troubled by it. *His* peculiarities, on the other hand, were unpleasantly suggestive of genuine mystery. His variableness was indeed amazing. John never knew

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how to take him. Sometimes he would scuffle into the room, hat on, in the vilest of tempers, and without so much as a nod of recognition, begin to growl and swear about everything and at everybody. Then he would treat the guest with the scantest courtesy, hardly deigning to acknowledge his presence, or to take any notice of his questions. At such times, too, as John marked, with great resentment, he was particularly rough with Victorine, who, however, merely laughed at his churlishness. Then there were other occasions when for him he was relatively communicative ; and when, reserving his curses for the weather, which was always unendurable, he condescended to join, with some show of interest, in the general talk. In this mood, while pleasant enough towards the company at large, he would be quite sportive with Victorine, and almost over-insistent in his attentions to John himself. He would force his cigars and cigarettes upon him, half-a-dozen at a time ; grasp him by the hand ; make him sit close to him ; engage him in conversation about his (John's) health, family, movements, opinions of this or that ; and contrive, in a more or less awkward fashion, to assure him of the high esteem and brotherly affection in which he personally held him. All this was very strange and very embarrassing, and it kept John's mind in a perpetual turmoil. Once or twice he ventured to speak of the matter to Victorine ; but her replies were always rambling and unsatisfactory :—"Yes ; he's a queer fellow—poor old Alexis ! Everybody finds him so—especially at first. You've got to know him well before you can understand him. He has only recently recovered from a very serious illness,

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and is still in a terribly nervous condition. You mustn't mind him, John! You'll get on famously together by-and-by. He's very fond of you as it is, only—and then, his disappointment, you know . . .” John saw that, for some reason, the girl had an objection to having the subject discussed between them, and for his own part, he was indeed glad enough at this point to let it drop. Such explanation as she offered, however, he felt to be really no explanation at all; and her own reticence only served to make things worse. On the whole, he was distinctly well pleased when Alexis saw fit, as he did once in a while, to keep out of the way altogether.

In fact, John was glad enough to have the others keep out of the way, too. Even Uncle Michael's memories of Victorine were, after all, far less ravishing than Victorine herself, and when they came in between him and his Dulcinea, they seemed a trifle long-winded and impertinent. Fortunately, there was scarcely an evening when the lovers were not left to enjoy at least half an hour of *solitude à deux*, and its unalloyed bliss. Either because other engagements called them off, as they were wont to allege, or perhaps simply to escape from the embarrassment which people generally feel when they are conscious of interfering with the necessities of courtship, one by one the frequenters of the house put on their hats, nodded good-night, and disappeared. Then with the closing of the door upon the last of them, Elysium opened, and John was privileged to revel in its indescribable glory.

CHAPTER XVI

IN WHICH JOHN, HAVING DECLARED HIS WILLINGNESS TO DO ANYTHING FOR VICTORINE'S SAKE, IS SUDDENLY TAKEN AT HIS WORD

THEIR talk was nearly always of the present, and when, on rare occasions, it turned for a moment or two upon the future, and the possibilities it held in store, it touched the question of prospective bliss only in the vaguest and most general way. There were a hundred little things John would well have liked to discuss—things of a distinctly mundane and practical character, such as might probably be held to interest a young man and maiden, who looked forward to becoming, at no very remote date, husband and wife. To him, such subjects would not have jarred with his romance, but rather served to give it basis and reality. But any attempt made by him to broach the question of increasing salary (problematical, but alluring), the most convenient suburb for people of quiet tastes and limited means, the price of provisions, and so forth, was sure to end in failure. However serious she might till that moment have been, Victorine's mood would then undergo an instant change, and sometimes with a petulant little grimace, sometimes with a whimsical jest or wayward fancy, sometimes with an outspoken

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protest that it would be soon enough to bother their heads about such matters by-and-by, she would put a hasty period to her lover's prosaic discourse. Such behaviour puzzled and hurt him at first, and once or twice he tried to reason with her about it.

"You know, dearest," he would say, "all these questions are very important. When presently we are quite ready to—to get married—you needn't laugh, Victorine—"

"Yes, yes, John, I know," she would answer lightly; "we'll come round to them all in good time. But why should we let them interfere with us now? Let us live in the present, and enjoy it as much as ever we can, because—"

"But it seems to me, darling, that we can enjoy it all the more by looking forward a little into the future, and thinking of the time when—you know, Victorine—when we shall belong to one another always. I love to think of all that myself. I build up all sorts of beautiful air-castles while I am riding on the tops of omnibuses, or in the Underground; and when I go to bed at night—Hulloa, dearest, why, what's the matter?"

For this strange girl, who only a moment before had appeared to be in the merriest of humours, was now sobbing on John's shoulder, with her face buried in her hands. It need hardly be said that the discussion was dropped while the necessary work of consolation proceeded, and that the young man was in no hurry to take it up again. It was all very odd, it was even unaccountable—yet it was quite in keeping with Victorine's capricious ways. And so, when, after two or three attempts, he became quite

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convinced that for some unfathomable reason she did not really want as yet to talk about the future, he was careful to leave the objectionable topic severely alone.

Meanwhile, though, with a truly lover-like lack of perception, he did not himself realise it, in all their long, delicious *tête-à-têtes* the lion's part of the conversation fell always to his share. He chattered away, and she listened—this was their ordinary division of labour. Night after night, week after week, he learned nothing more definite about herself, her family, her past, her education, her present condition, her relations with the curious folk among whom at the moment her lot was cast. To all intents and purposes, she remained to him as much a riddle and mystery as she had been on the occasion of his first visit to Quemby Court. But, on the other hand, night after night, and week after week, he, little by little, gave her a full and detailed account of his life from childhood up—of his father, the sometime Primitive Methodist local preacher; of his mother, and her struggles on his behalf, the old lodging-house out of which she had made money enough to put him through school, and their quiet little home in Hammersmith; of his own boyish days, and their misery (which did not look quite as miserable in the retrospect); of the office, and his daily routine there; and of Ben Chadwick, and their many smokes together. Very lightly indeed did he touch upon his old romantic dreams and aspirations, and upon his devotion to a class of literature which had well-nigh turned his head; for at any reference to this theme he became conscious

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of the girl's keen eyes fixed quizzically upon him, and felt it, on the whole, best not to enter into particulars. But this was the solitary subject connected with himself about which he did not talk freely and unreservedly. And with what avidity she drank in all he said! How intensely interesting it all seemed to be to her! How she made him repeat certain incidents and experiences over and over again! How she cross-examined him about even unimportant details, and was never quite contented till she had mentally put everything into its proper place. "Stop, John!" she would sometimes say. "Did all this occur before you went to the office?" or, "Was Mr. Chadwick with you when this happened?" or, "Did you tell your mother about that, John dear? and if so, what did she say?" And then John had to tax his memory for specific replies, and repeat conversations, and explain away inconsistencies in his narratives. In particular, Victorine was never tired of hearing him talk about his mother, concerning whom she exhibited the liveliest curiosity. "How delightful it must be that you are so fond of one another!" she would often remark, when he touched accidentally upon some intimate phase of their domestic life. "You are a lucky boy, John, to have such a mother, and—and—she's a happy woman to have such a son!" And always as she spoke in this way her voice dropped to a tremulous whisper, and more than once he saw that the tears were in her eyes. And then, heedless of all possible difficulties, he would urge her to let him take her the very next day to Hammersmith, that she might meet his mother in the flesh. "You could then know her for yourself,

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Victorine. Why not, darling? You'd like her, I know, and she would love you. Who could help loving you?" But Victorine was always firm. "Not just yet, John dear—by-and-by—a little later on; not just now." And then, suddenly, a strange expression would come into her face—an expression he could not in the least understand. Sometimes it seemed to him a hard, stern look; sometimes it half suggested amusement; more often it was a look of sudden and intense pain. But whatever it was, it was only momentary. As if by magic, this mysterious cloud blew over, and the reckless jest and light laugh told him that the girl was herself again.

As time went on, however, John gradually became aware of a remarkable change in Victorine's whole manner and conversation. He began first of all to notice that she was losing something of her old buoyancy and abandon, and growing silent and *dis-traité*. She would fall into fits of abstraction, during which it was perfectly clear that she did not heed what he was talking about, or whether, indeed, he was talking at all; and when he recalled her by the generous offer of a penny for her thoughts, she would start as if frightened, and answer his merriment with a forced smile, which had nothing about it of the old radiance and vivacity. It seemed to him, too, as he watched her furtively—he soon saw that she was embarrassed by anything approaching scrutiny, and this in turn filled him with vague alarm—that she was losing the delicate colour from her cheeks; that dark rings were coming under her eyes, and hard lines about the corners of her mouth; that her face was paler, her features sharper than formerly. All

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this did not in the least interfere with her beauty—he even thought sometimes that it rather enhanced it ; but it told of some secret trouble, and made him sick at heart. Now keenly observant of every slight peculiarity of her behaviour, he presently observed that she had ceased altogether to question him about his personal affairs—the very subject in which she had shown the deepest interest—and was evidently anxious to deflect the conversation into another channel when it ran towards his mother or his life at home. But worse than all, perhaps, was the unnatural nervousness which evening by evening became more and more marked, and the excitability of movement and speech which he saw clearly enough, from their quick glances now at the girl, and now at one another, did not escape the attention of Uncle Michael and Aunt Anna, though they said no word about it. Something was wrong—terribly wrong ; on that he was convinced. But what could it be ? Was it physical or mental ? Had it anything to do with himself ? Was it possibly connected with the men and women with whom she lived—with Alexis, perhaps, and their old relations together ? Could it even mean—good God ! could it even mean that the spell of a rival lover was falling upon her, and that she was struggling against a powerful current which was little by little bearing her away from *him* ? Night after night, in his long, lonely homeward way, he was tortured by these questions, and after he hurried, brain-weary, to bed, they gave him no rest. He felt at last that he could stand it no longer—that come what might of it, he must and would find out the worst. For a short time he half thought that he would go first, not

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to Victorine herself, but to Patrick, with whom he was now on the pleasantest of terms, and whom he believed he could implicitly trust. But when the moment came, he revolted against the idea of taking anyone, even Patrick, into his confidence. He waited that evening—longer than usual, as it happened, for Uncle Michael, and Mrs. Bobby, and Aunt Anna remained gossiping by the fire till he fancied they had made up their minds never to go away—for the opportunity of private intercourse to come. And then, alone with Victorine, he made a plunge.

“Darling, what *is* the matter with you? Are you ill? Are you worried? You don’t know how wretched you are making me! Answer me, darling—I must and will know.”

“Don’t be silly, John,” the girl replied. “Whatever should be the matter with me?”

“Ah, that’s exactly what I want to find out,” was John’s response. “Come, dear, it’s of no use for you to try to turn me aside. If there is anything on your mind—”

To poor John’s astonishment, Victorine disengaged herself from his encircling arm, and sprang to her feet.

“Look here, John,” she said petulantly, “I don’t see why you should assume the right of cross-examining me—upon my word, I don’t. I call it very, very impertinent—there! You ought to know better—at any rate, you ought to know me better. Just because other girls stand being bullied, you think I’ll stand it, too. But you’re very much mistaken, for I won’t—so there again! When I don’t see fit to talk, it’s my usual habit to hold my tongue; and if you

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don't like that, I'm sorry for it. That's all I can say. You must take me as you find me, and if I don't come up to your English standard, you'd better tell me so at once, and have done with it!"

Absolutely taken aback by this extraordinary and unexpected outburst, and, indeed, completely overwhelmed by it, John sat rooted to the sofa, blankly gazing at the girl, like one suddenly deprived of the power of both movement and speech. His jaw had fallen, his blue eyes were fixed in a stare of anguish and fright, his hands were tightly clutched upon his knees. Meanwhile, with every muscle of her body seemingly strained to its utmost tension, she stood with her back to the fire in an attitude of rigid determination, and her half-averted face was all ablaze.

It was some moments before either of them broke the painful silence.

"Oh, Victorine!" he said at last. His voice was hardly raised above a whisper, but his quiet tones were full of blended pain, and pity, and reproach. "Oh, Victorine!"

It was all he could find to say, for his whole nature was stunned and crushed. But the words that were thus wrung from his heart acted like magic upon the strange, impulsive girl. The next instant she was on her knees beside him; her hands were clasped in fierce embrace about his neck; he felt her rock and sway against him in a passionate storm of tears.

"Oh, John, John!" she cried convulsively, while the poor fellow, as much staggered by this explosion of remorse as he had been just before by her irruption of anger, vainly did his best to calm her. "Oh, John!"

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darling, darling John! what will you think of me? I couldn't help it, John—really, I couldn't; it was all because I love you. And I do love you more than you know—more than I ever thought I could love anyone—a thousand times more than I can tell you. But I am a wicked girl, and not a bit worthy of you, and I could only make you unhappy, and bring all sorts of trouble into your life. And so you must leave me, John—leave me altogether, and go away, and never see me again, and—and—forget all about me. Oh, John! promise me that you will go away, and never come back, and forget all about me! Promise me, John!”

John's brain was in a tumult, and the very foundations of the world seemed to be breaking up beneath him. In the confused welter of thoughts and feelings, there was only one thing that he could see clearly, and to this he clung with all the tenacity of despair.

“I'll not promise anything of the kind,” he said stoutly.

“Oh, but you must—you must!” the girl went on, more wildly than ever. “You don't understand, John, but you must do as I tell you; and some day you will know all about it, and then you will see that I was right. And when the time comes—”

But here the tempest of her feelings was again too much for her, and burying her face in her hands upon his knees, she began to sob hysterically.

John Smith knew little about women and their ways, and had never before been concerned in such an emotional crisis as this. Moreover, as he had not the slightest conception of what Victorine was talking about, he would have been at a total loss to

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decide what line of argument to take with her, even if argument of any sort had seemed likely to avail. But simple love, when it is as strong and pure as his, may often be relied upon for guidance where other counsels would fail, and in that moment of sudden agitation and bewilderment, the unsophisticated young fellow behaved with a tact and delicacy which I daresay would have astonished him had he paused to think. Very gently and very tenderly he leaned over the trembling girl, softly caressing her beautiful brown hair, and whispering broken sentences of appeal and consolation, which would look very foolish indeed if set down here in cold print, but which fell from his lips quivering with all the resistless eloquence of the heart. How often, and with what a strange pang of wonder and regret, did he think in after years of all that happened in those few passionate minutes, during which there came to him for the first time, and as if in a lightning-flash, the full realisation of his power over the girl who hitherto, as he now felt, had received his love without yielding herself absolutely and completely in return. But now he knew her to be his indeed—knew it by every subtle token—knew it by the long, hot, clinging kiss in which their lips presently met, and which seemed to him as the ultimate sign and seal of their union and their fate! And little by little the fit passed away, the sobs subsided, and Victorine grew calm again.

“Oh, John,” she cried, looking up into his face, and her great grey eyes gleamed more luminously than ever through her tears—“oh, John, will you—can you forgive me?”

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"Forgive you, Victorine? Don't talk like that, darling. As if I had anything to forgive!"

"Ah, but I need your forgiveness—you don't know how I need it! Tell me you forgive me, John—tell me you forgive me!" She caught her breath. "Tell me you forgive me!" she insisted.

John tried to treat her earnest pleadings with a smile, but her over-strained and serious face told him that his answer must be serious, too.

"I don't like you to talk like that, Victorine," he said, very quietly; "but if you think there is anything to forgive, I forgive it with all my heart."

"Oh, John, how good you are! And now I want you to promise me—" She stopped suddenly, evidently in sharp struggle with herself, lest she should again lose her self-control.

"Anything, dearest," said John, by way of encouragement. "I mean anything but what you asked me to promise just now."

"No, I won't ask you that," answered Victorine slowly. "I was talking madly then, and I could not bear to think you would ever leave me of your own accord, John, or that you would ever forget me. No—not that, not that!" She passed her hand across her eyes, as if to shut out the very thought. "I want you to promise me"—she dropped her voice to so low a whisper that John had to bend close down to her to catch the words—"I want you to promise me that—that you will always think kindly of me—that, if you can, you will always love me, however your love may be tested, John, and whatever may happen!"

"Victorine," said John firmly, "what in the world is putting all these outlandish and absurd notions

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into your head? You are out of sorts, darling, and low-spirited, or you wouldn't say such things. As if anything could happen to part us now! As if—"

"John," she said, with a touch of her old impatience, "I will not be put off. Oh, John, if you really, really care for me one little bit—" And again she buried her face in her hands upon his knees, and gave way to the tears she was no longer able to restrain.

Then John clasped her to him in closer embrace.

"I swear, dearest, that whatever may happen, nothing can ever make me love you less, or think of you otherwise than I do now!"

Little did he guess how soon and how severely that solemn declaration of his was to be brought to the test.

When, fifteen minutes later, the violent slamming of the front door and a confused sound of voices in the lower passage gave warning of the arrival of some of their friends, Victorine sprang hurriedly to her feet.

"It will never do to let them catch me like this," she said, with an only half-successful attempt to treat the situation as the subject for a joke, "with my eyes all red, and my hair just anyhow. Why, they'd think we'd been having a downright quarrel, John, and that you had just been bullying me right and left." She gave a hollow little laugh, evidently in recognition of the absurdity of such a supposition. "I shan't be a minute, dear, but I positively must go and put myself a bit straight." And with a light pat on his cheek, she hastened from the room.

The next minute Patrick and Alexis came in

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together. The former seemed in his customary cheerful spirits, and was humming one of his favourite Irish ditties. The latter wore his usual scowl. They were followed almost immediately by Bobby and his wife.

"Hello, John Smith!" cried Patrick, throwing his hat on the table and divesting himself of his great-coat. "All alone, eh? Where's the charmer?"

John confined himself to the statement that she would probably be back directly, and, to change the subject, asked whether it had stopped raining. This gave Alexis an opening for a little characteristic blasphemy. Meanwhile, Mrs. Bobby began to roll a cigarette with some tobacco she chanced to spy on the mantelpiece, and Bobby, with his hands deep down in his pockets, spat meditatively several times into the fire. Certainly, if Patrick was cheerful, his companions looked and acted as if they were tired, morose, and generally out of sorts.

Victorine soon returned, with little about her to indicate the stress through which she had recently passed. Cold water and eau-de-cologne, and a resolute application of the brush and comb, had made her appear almost as fresh as ever again; but there was still a tell-tale redness about the eyes, and, in spite of her wonderful self-control, a certain strain of nervousness betrayed itself in her movements, and in the heightened tones of her voice. Perhaps it was because he was unusually observant that evening that John was quick to notice that these little signs did not escape the attention of the others in the room. Mrs. Bobby paused in the act of lighting her cigarette with a spill made out of the corner of a news-

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paper ; Patrick and Alexis exchanged rapid looks of intelligence ; even Bobby turned on his heel and shot an inquiring glance across at his wife. It was an affair of an instant only, but not a detail was lost on the lover. For a moment he held his breath, fancying that someone was going to say something that, on Victorine's account, he would resent ; but Patrick, in his happy way, soon scattered every unpleasant thought.

"Vicky, my dear," he cried, collapsing into an easy-chair, "go and fetch a bottle of whisky from the kitchen, there's a good girl ; and then, with John Smith's permission, I will give you a chaste, paternal kiss. I'm confoundedly tired, and, good gracious ! I haven't had a drink this evening, 'pon my sammy, I haven't."

The prospect of a friendly glass at once restored the social equilibrium. Alexis offered John one of his famous cigars ; Mrs. Bobby gave herself up to the pastime of blowing one ring of smoke through another ; and Bobby renewed his attentions to the fire.

All that night, and the following day, John had plenty to think about, and his thoughts were by no means of the brightest complexion. Victorine's behaviour filled him with indescribable alarm, which was only intensified by the fact that, try as he would, he could find no explanation for her wild words and hysterical emotion. Ill at ease, he had, indeed, been about her for several weeks now ; she had not been herself ; he had fancied her out of health, feverish, perhaps (he had told himself, for there seemed some reason for such a hypothesis) worried and depressed

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about household affairs. But nothing had led him to anticipate the terrible storm which had broken so suddenly, and which baffled him the more, the more carefully he went in memory over its every detail. And somehow, though he would have been at a total loss to say why—he could not persuade himself that it was due only to his own high-strung condition—he found himself attaching a sort of critical importance to the conduct of those other four people when Victorine had returned to the room. Why had they glanced at one another in that furtive, suspicious way? Did they see anything surprising, anything which they did not like, in her appearance, and what they might infer from it? How could it be any concern of theirs? And yet they regarded it as some concern of theirs; he was thoroughly convinced of that. They were annoyed, even angry, over what they guessed or fancied must have taken place; he was convinced of that, too. No, it was not imagination. He had seen the scowl deepen on Alexis' brow, and the cynical smile which just for one instant had flitted over Mrs. Bobby's lips, and Bobby's fugitive look of contempt, and the glance of anger which, rapidly as it had passed again, had filled Patrick's eyes with a light he had never seen there before.

All this was not imagination, he told himself again and again; and all this added incalculably to the anxiety which Victorine's own conduct had caused. Something was evidently the matter; something very serious, indeed; something which had its root in troubles far deeper than any young girl's caprice. The agony of that knowledge, and still worse, the

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agony of the ignorance which went along with it, were not to be endured. For his sake and for hers, he felt, as he had felt before, only now with a thousand times the strength of his former conviction, that he must and would get to the bottom of the mystery.

"This very evening," he said to himself, "I will go straight to Uncle Michael, and point-blank, I will ask him what is the matter. He is sure to know all about it. And if he knows, I will know, too."

It was thus in a very determined, and even pugnacious, frame of mind that John Smith repaired to Quemby Court on the night following his amazing scene with Victorine. He walked with the firm step of a man who was determined to "have it out" with somebody. His knock at the door was longer and louder than usual. And the faithful and veracious chronicler of these adventures is glad to add the assurance that John's behaviour would unquestionably have reached the highest standard of romantic morals, if only a chance had been given to him to show his mettle. But, unluckily, no such chance was given to him. Once more his adventures were to be made for him, and not by him; and if past events had been surprising, what was yet to come was to be more surprising still.

On entering the room, he found a small group gathered about the table, and he was instantly aware of a general atmosphere of excitement and unrest. Uncle Michael was there, and Aunt Anna, Mrs. Bobby, and Victorine; and in addition to these were a certain Frenchman, whom he had seen only once before, and who spoke English so imperfectly that their conversation had then been limited to a few

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spasmodic nods and smiles, and an individual who always went by the extraordinary name of Spooks—a large, unwholesome-looking creature, of doubtful nationality, who never seemed to have shaved more recently than yesterday, and who everlastingly carried an exceedingly dirty pocket-handkerchief screwed up into a hard ball in his hand. John's first impression was that they had all been quarrelling, but this, of course, was merely conjecture. That they were all extremely agitated was, however, perfectly manifest. Uncle Michael was holding a letter on the table before him, and his hand trembled so violently that the paper rustled. The others were bending across to him, as though they had been listening intently to what he had been reading; their faces were strained, their mouths partly open. Victorine was ghastly pale, and her eyes were red, as they had been the night before. When John took her hand, he shuddered, for it was icy cold.

No one but Victorine took much notice of his arrival, and even she did not rise from her place, or give any indication of gladness on seeing him. The rest merely nodded. What struck him at once as curious was that, despite his presence, they all kept their seats, and preserved their attitudes of fixed attention. Often enough before he had found some of them in conference, but his appearance had always been the signal for its breaking up.

Embarrassed by this unusual reception, and, while unwilling to intrude where he was not wanted, seeing no reason why he should assume that his appearance was unwelcome, John, after a moment's hesitation, quietly dropped into a chair. He would even have

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broken the silence which seemed to hold them as a spell had he found an opportunity, but those about the table still ignored him altogether. To his surprise, Victorine herself kept her face obstinately turned away.

"Den we are to consider dat settled," said Uncle Michael, at length, in English, and glancing sharply from beneath his shaggy eyebrows from one to another of his companions. He held up the letter as he spoke, as if his remark had direct reference to its contents, and John noticed that his hand trembled more than ever.

Mrs. Bobby and Spooks nodded in reply. The Frenchman was heard to murmur something that sounded like "d'accord." Aunt Anna and Victorine, so far as John could perceive, gave no answer, either by word or sign.

Then Uncle Michael, suddenly shifting his position, looked John straight in the face.

"John Smit," he said, speaking very slowly, and measuring his words in a way that was quite unusual with him, "I belief I am right in tinkin dat we may treat you as a frient."

Taken by surprise as he was by this unexpected question, the young man nevertheless found words to say that the supposition was perfectly correct.

"Den I will speak to you as a frient," Uncle Michael went on. "We are in difficulties—I mean, our leetle girl here is in difficulties." John sat farther forward in his chair, and Victorine began to cry very quietly, with her face still averted from him. "We want someone to help us—someone we can apsolutely trust. Patrick has been callt away on pusiness; zo

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has Poppy ; zo has Alexis ; ant as bod Spooks ant I are bount to stay here, we can neider of us do what has to be done. Oderwise, we shoul't nefer ask you to undertake somding which may—which may—”

“Be very inconvenient,” put in Mrs. Bobby, as Uncle Michael began to stumble.

“Yaw—which may pe fery inconfenient,” Uncle Michael continued. “Put I belief you haf more dan once said dat you were ready to do anyding for our tear leetle girl here, even—even—”

“Even at the risk of some trouble and self-sacrifice,” suggested Mrs. Bobby again.

“Yaw—efen at de risk of some trouple and self-sacrifice—*hein* ?”

“I assure you,” said John fervently, “that if Victorine is in any need of help, and if I can help her in any way, you have only to tell me what you want me to do.”

“Yaw—yaw,” said Uncle Michael, speaking more rapidly, yet with a curious, anxious expression lingering about his face ; “dat is goot, fery goot. Well, den, Victorine *is* in neet of help, ant you can help her, and I can tell you how in a nudshell, John Smit. I haf a letter here which compels somebody to go to Paris at once. Will you go ?”

John could never have dreamed that the request for assistance, so readily acceded to in advance, would have come in such an impossible shape as this.

“Will I go to Paris ?” he stammered, staring bewildered at Uncle Michael, Aunt Anna, Mrs. Bobby, the Frenchman, and Spooks, who had all turned towards him, and were watching him with undisguised

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interest. "I am sure I would do anything I could, as I said just now ; but, you see, I can't get away from the office—and—and—good heavens ! I don't know how it could be done."

"Then you refuse to undertake this for Victorine ?" said Mrs. Bobby, in a voice which betokened excitement no longer to be suppressed.

"Refuse !" faltered poor John. "I—I—"

"John," said Victorine, turning on him for the first time that evening, and clasping her hands with a quick, convulsive movement, "you won't say no. It"—her voice almost broke, but with an evident effort she managed to control herself—"it is for my sake !"

The appealing eloquence of those tones, the imploring look in that beautiful, tear-stained face, settled the question with him instantly.

"I will go for you," he said, quite simply. "When do you want me to start ?"

CHAPTER XVII

IN WHICH JOHN SMITH PREPARES FOR HIS MISSION,
BUT HAS MUCH CAUSE FOR DISQUIETUDE

A CHURCH clock, somewhere in the distance, told the hour of three with great deliberation, and a few moments later was followed in hot haste by the old-fashioned clock in the sitting-room downstairs, which had a habit of being a trifle behind time, and struck all in a hurry, as if rather ashamed of itself. John Smith, wrapped up in his thick overcoat, as some protection against the chill night air, for which, however, he was far too excited to care very much, pushed the letter he had just finished from him with a heavy sigh of relief, and leaned back in his chair. It had given him immense trouble to indite those few lines. A whole heap of tiny scraps of paper on the table at his side bore testimony to the number of his failures.

"There, I think that will do," he muttered; "at all events, I don't see how I can improve upon it."

He took up the letter again, and read it over, slowly and critically, now and then pausing with painful precision to dot an i, or cross a t; and this is how it ran :

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“ Wednesday Evening.

“ Messrs. Werry & Co.,
St. Mary Axe, E.C.

“ DEAR SIRs,—It is with deep regret that I have to inform you that news has just reached me by telegram of the sudden death of an aunt of mine in the North. As I am the only one of the family who can take charge of her affairs, and make the necessary arrangements for the funeral, etc., I find myself compelled to leave by the first train in the morning for her former home. My absence from the office will, I anticipate and trust, be a matter of a few days only. I shall, of course, make it as brief as I possibly can. I hope, under the circumstances, that you will pardon me for not waiting to report myself to you to-morrow in person. I need hardly add that I shall be quite willing to deduct the time of my absence from my regular fortnight's holiday next summer.

“ In the hope that this unforeseen event will not put you to any great inconvenience, I remain,

“ Faithfully yours,

“ JOHN SMITH.”

“ Yes, that will do,” John repeated, with a nod expressive of entire satisfaction ; and he crept tip-toe across the room after his pipe and matches, for his head was throbbing from the strain of composition, and he craved the soothing influences of tobacco.

Those scraps of discarded letters at his side, could they have been put together into their proper order, would have furnished an instructive history of the evolution of the elaborate falsehood which John

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had now achieved. His simple nature did not take readily to lying; and now that, after many blunders, he had finally got his trumped-up explanation into shape, it did not for a moment occur to him that to anyone reading it disinterestedly his story of the aunt and her funeral might easily seem at least suspicious. And what wrenchings of the brain and fierce ruffings of the hair (which now stood up like porcupine quills all over his head) had been required to bring his myth to birth! If Victorine only knew what he was already undergoing for her sake! Well, the time would come; and meanwhile, even now there was the intense pleasure of realising that all his labours, his vigils, his difficulties (present and to come), his inconveniences, his untruths (of which otherwise he would have been heartily ashamed) were for her dear sake.

He folded the letter, fastened the envelope, wrote the address.

"I'll post that the first go-off in the morning," he thought. "They'll get it by mid-day, almost as soon as they have begun to wonder why I don't turn up."

So much for Werry & Co. It remained to settle with his mother. He had already taken the first necessary step with her; he had called from outside her bedroom door, on his return from Quemby Court, to tell her that he had to leave for the city very early the next morning, and to bespeak breakfast for an hour before the usual time. But now to cover his absence! Of course, it would be of no use to try any aunt-story with Mrs. Smith; that, on the face of it, would be absurd. But, fortunately, this aspect of his problem presented no great difficulty.

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As he had employed the domestic form of excuse with the "governor," so he would now make the "governor" himself in turn serve his purpose at home: he would have to be sent away suddenly by the office on business of pressing importance. It is true that such a thing had never before happened during all the years he had been in St. Mary Axe; that there was not the slightest likelihood of its happening, should he remain there till he was toothless and bald. But that did not much matter. Mrs. Smith was not suspicious; "business" with her was always a word of vaguest significance, covering many unknown facts and more possibilities. Deeply interested as she was in her son in a general way, she had never inquired very curiously into the details of his city life.

"I can square her all right," said John to himself, ignoring the heinousness of a deception to which, under other conditions, he would never have dreamed of stooping; "I can square her all right. And as for Ben, it's lucky I shan't see him before I go; so there's no need to bother about him till I get back. And when this business is over and done with, and Victorine is willing—as I am sure she will be—to have everything come out, then I'll tell him the whole story from first to last. Good old Ben! If I'm not very much mistaken, he'll be a bit surprised."

John laughed a little, softly, in anticipation of his friend's astonishment, and then, hastily undressing, scrambled into bed—but not to rest; he had too many things to think of for that. Thus far he had only made his practical plans for an easy escape; these were troublesome enough, in all conscience.

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But what were these, after all, compared with all the anxieties and dangers attendant upon the mysterious adventure upon which he was now about to embark?

A journey to Paris, undertaken on the spur of the moment, and without opportunity for forethought or preparation, was in itself no trivial matter for a young man of narrow Cockney training, who had scarcely been a couple of hundred miles from London during the whole course of his life; who knew, perhaps, ten words of French; who regarded all French people with distrust and animosity, and to whom Paris had hitherto seemed as remote and impossible as San Francisco or Buenos Ayres. Anyone accustomed to pack his Gladstone at a few hours' notice, and run across to meet an appointment or enjoy a day or two's holiday on the other side of the Channel, would find it hard to appreciate the state of wild excitement into which John was thrown by the mere thought of the novel experiences which the morrow was to bring forth. Visions of tempest and sea-sickness haunted him unceasingly; apparitions of ferocious Custom-house officers, and truculent railway guards, and quarrelsome cabmen, all jabbering an unknown tongue, and all angry (as only "foreigners" can be angry) at his inability to understand them, jostled one another in his feverish imagination. But these things were not the worst. Try as he would—and for his own peace of mind he *did* try very hard indeed—he could not ignore the fact that he was still a good deal in the dark as to the precise object of his hurried mission to the French capital. Uncle Michael had been long-winded enough in his explanations, to be sure; but

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Uncle Michael, as John had had many previous occasions for discovering, possessed the true oratorical gift of making matters more obscure the more he talked about them ; and in this particular instance, neither Spooks nor the Frenchman, Mrs. Bobby nor Victorine herself, had done much to help him out. It appeared that the serious difficulties, in the settlement of which his own assistance was so urgently required, were in some way directly connected with those foreign investments about which Victorine had more than once spoken to him. He remembered how she had told him that her little personal fortune had been left in entire charge of Uncle Michael's cousin in Paris, and how, a short time back, she had expressed some doubt about the possible misuse, on his part, of the powers which, through simple carelessness or for unspecified family reasons (into that question John had not entered) had been placed in his hands. And now, what the girl had foreseen and dreaded had actually come to pass. Uncle Michael's cousin had been guilty of dishonesty, and there was every probability that he had swallowed up every penny of Victorine's in his own reckless and unfortunate speculations. So much John understood, or fancied he understood ; though even here he felt that the many intricate details of the business, Uncle Michael's discussion of which he had done his best to follow, for the most eluded him as he went over their conversation again and again in his thoughts. But what were his functions in the matter ? It is needless to say that he would have gone anywhere and done anything to save Victorine's money, if that were possible—not for selfish reasons ; it is only justice to

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him to say that no personal consideration had entered his mind, but wholly and solely for her sake; and according to Uncle Michael, the money might still be saved, provided that they could act with sufficient rapidity and decision. And what he had to do was this: He had to take with him a certain document of the most importance; he had to carry this post-haste to an address which was to be given to him before starting; he had then to inquire for a particular individual, whose name had not as yet transpired; this said individual would sign the said document in his presence, and after witnessing it in proper form, he would take it, at the earliest possible moment, to a firm of lawyers, also to be designated in due season, who would then be able to act upon it without delay. This done, his errand was at an end, and he was free to return to London as soon as he liked. Such were his general directions; and John, in reply to Uncle Michael's question, had given his assurance that he could follow them without difficulty. But when, in his turn, he had instituted some inquiry into the exact nature of the document of which he was to be the bearer, and which he was to witness with his own signature—into the bearings of this upon the various problems involved in the case, and into the probable use which the lawyers would make of it—he had failed to elicit any satisfactory answers. Uncle Michael had begun by being excited and unintelligible; he ended by declaring that it was impossible to give John a clear idea of all these things without a minute analysis of particulars in connection both with the case itself and with French methods of legal pro-

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cedure ; and for such they had now no time to spare. The great thing was to get the business settled while there was still a chance of success. "And then, you know," Mrs. Bobby had added, with much sagacity—she seemed the only one to keep her wits about her—"when it is properly settled, we can give John Smith a full account of it all, from first to last. It's a terribly confused affair, but we can unravel it at our leisure, and when all the anxiety and excitement are over. In the meantime, Victorine asks you to do this for her, because there is no one in the world she can trust as she trusts you, John—no one who would so willingly help her in the hour of need." "Yaw, yaw—dat is zo, dat is zo," Uncle Michael had murmured, apparently much relieved to have the case presented so lucidly. And Victorine's cold and clammy fingers had met his own, under the table, at this point, and their fierce pressure had told him of her tension of feeling. He had noticed, all through the conference, that it was only by the greatest effort that she had succeeded in keeping her self-control.

John saw the point of Mrs. Bobby's reasoning, and made the most of it. Of course, if the matter was really as complex and mysterious as they all seemed to consider it, while immediate action was necessary, it was the proper thing to do first of all, and as quickly as possible, whatever might be required. There would be plenty of time to discuss it all in its various aspects afterwards. And as for John—well, if Uncle Michael could use him to good purpose by acting upon the knowledge which he, John, did not possess, he was willing enough to be

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so used ; only he could not help feeling that his own part was too much like that of the common soldier, who is sent into the field in total ignorance of the relation of his individual efforts to the grand plan of campaign. And this thought made him a little restless, and gave him a vague sense of alarm.

"However," he said to himself, turning for the fiftieth time on his pillow, "something else may come out in the morning. They are all so confused and worried that it's no wonder they don't want to bother themselves about anything that isn't directly a part of the course of action they have made up their minds to adopt. Perhaps things may get to seem a trifle clearer before I start. But if not—"

He thought of Victorine's pale, tear-stained face and worn, sleepless expression, and felt that if he could only be instrumental in bringing back the colour to her cheeks and the natural light to her eyes, he would indeed have gained an exceeding great reward.

The next morning he was up long before day-break, and finding himself already dressed half an hour too early for the breakfast, in preparation of which he heard his mother bustling about below, he filled in the time by putting into his bag the few things he fancied he might need on his journey. He was not a little nervous when he joined his mother at the breakfast-table ; but to his surprise, it seemed easier to break the news to her than he had expected. The truth is, that matters of such weight were occupying the foreground of his thought that the practical business of settling his departure with her

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appeared only an incident. Poor Mrs. Smith at first stared at her son in dumb, open-mouthed astonishment. His absence from home, even for a night or two, was a thing unheard of, save during his regular summer outing to the sea-side, when more often than not she had herself accompanied him ; and then that he should be called away to Paris, beyond all places in the world—a city which loomed up vaguely in her imagination as a perfect sink of unrighteousness and iniquity ! It took her some minutes to digest John's announcement, and some minutes more to get over the shock, and reconcile herself to it. But gradually, as he had anticipated, she came to see things in the proper light. Of course, business was business ; that he should be selected for the journey indicated Mr. Werry's increasing confidence in him ; there was no telling but what, if this experiment turned out well, he might get a considerable promotion in the firm, with an increase of salary, which would certainly be highly acceptable ; he wouldn't be away long, and she would get on as best she could without him ; Mrs. Brown next door was very kind, and she could always rap on the wall in case of wanting anything in the night ; and—and—by the way, was John certain that the clean shirt he would want to take with him was properly aired ? and had he put collars enough in his bag ? John was greatly relieved when the conversation took this turn. He was glad to have his mother overhaul his packing, rearrange things, add, change, do whatever her maternal instinct suggested as necessary or desirable, for this kept her mind employed. Then he took a long and affectionate farewell of her, during which

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his heart for the first time misgave him for the deceit he was practising towards her, and set out, ostensibly for the city, as he had, he informed her, to go to St. Mary Axe first for final instructions. In reality, his final instructions were awaiting him at Quemby Court.

"Kom early in de morning," Uncle Michael had said to him, on his leaving the night before, "we will den haf eberyding ready for you—de paper ant all—and will gif you full tirections how you are to proceet. Den you can take de elefen o'clock train for Paris, which will get you dere in de efening. Dat will be goot—*hein!*"

To Quemby Court John accordingly took his way.

Aunt Anna opened the door to him, breathing more heavily, and looking, in her extraordinary matutinal *négligé*, fatter and untidier than usual. Her face was so white, her whole appearance so weird and fantastic, that one might almost have taken her, in the grey, uncertain light of the winter morning, for an extremely well-fed and substantial ghost. She grasped his hand warmly, and congratulated him on his early appearance.

"I hope you're feeling in good trim for your little jaunt?" she said.

"Oh, yes, I'm all right," John replied. Then the natural question sprang to his lips: "How's Victorine?"

Aunt Anna shook her head.

"She's not at all well, poor child—not at all well. I guess all this—this"—she paused, and waved her hand to fill up the gap in her sentence—"I guess it's

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just been too much for her. She had quite a little fever last night, and hardly got any sleep, and she's in bed with a splitting headache this morning."

John's countenance expressed his alarm.

"She's not going to be really ill, is she?" he asked hurriedly.

"Oh, no, I guess not," was Aunt Anna's reassuring reply. "We must keep her quiet till you get back. When she has you safely home again, and all this bad business has been settled, she'll pick up and be herself soon enough. She's not really a strong girl, you know, though she is so high-spirited; and there's one thing she can't stand, and that's worry."

"But I may see her again before I start, just to wish her good-bye, you know?"

"Best not, John, best not," answered the good fat woman decisively. "The great thing is to keep her absolutely quiet, to save her from everything that would be likely to excite her. I went into her room a few minutes ago, and found her sleeping as soundly as a child. That's what she wants—quiet and sleep, and nothing in the shape of excitement. I guess she'll sleep the whole day through now if she's only left alone; and when she wakes, I'll tell her you're gone, and give her all sorts of nice messages from you."

John found it difficult to reconcile himself to this arrangement.

"It seems awfully hard—" he began.

"Of course it does, of course it does," said Aunt Anna sympathetically—her wheezing sadly interfered with her utterance. "You'd naturally have liked a last word with her, and all that. I understand.

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But it wouldn't do—it wouldn't do a bit! You don't know how she takes on about you having to make this journey, in all this cold, trying weather, just on her account. If she saw you again in her present nervous state, she'd be terribly upset, and the consequences might be really serious. It wouldn't take much more than that to give her brain fever, or—or something. If we can only keep her fast asleep till you've got away, I guess she'll be all right. She won't have anything to do, then, but to look forward to your return—and that, you know, will only be a matter of—of a few hours."

"Oh, well, if you really think that this will be the wisest course," said John, very slowly.

"I don't think about it at all, my boy—I know." Aunt Anna put her fat hand in a motherly way upon his shoulder, and looked into his face with an encouraging smile. "You just take an old woman's advice, and you won't regret it, you may reckon on that. Now go right on up to the parlour. You'll find Uncle Michael there. He's all ready for you."

John obeyed, bitterly disappointed, of course, not to have even a few moments with Victorine, and greatly worried over these reports of her condition, yet not for a moment doubting that Aunt Anna was perfectly right. He entered the familiar sitting-room (which looked terribly dirty by the morning light, and smelt more like a tap-room than anything else) on tiptoe, fearful of making the slightest sound that might disturb the sleeping girl on the floor above. The consequence was that Uncle Michael, having at that instant his back towards the door, was unconscious of his approach. He was restlessly pacing the

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room, with his head thrown forward, and his hands thrust deep down into the pockets of his shabby, ill-fitting smoking coat. A bottle of whisky and a glass stood on the table among a confused litter of journals and papers.

"Good morning!" said John quietly.

Uncle Michael faced round with a violent start.

"My Got! I did not hear you kom," he said. "You haf crept in like a mouse."

There was a very noticeable touch of petulance in his voice, as if he resented having been taken by surprise.

"I did not want to make a noise," John explained, "because of Victorine."

"Ah—because of Victorine," Michael repeated, darting a quick look at the young man from beneath his shaggy brows. "So Aunt Anna has tolt you—" he paused, waiting for John to speak.

"She has told me that Victorine is not well this morning. I do hope it will not turn out to be anything serious."

"No, no," rejoined the other; "it will be nodings—it will be nodings. She must keep quiet—fery quiet, ant haf plenty of sleep, dat is all. Den she will be all right when you kom pack."

"Aunt Anna says she is sleeping now," John remarked.

"Ach, she is sleeping now? Dat is goot—dat is fery goot—*hein!* We must let her sleep. Dat is what she wants—sleep and quiet." He tapped his forehead. "She is a fery excitable leetle girl, ant we haf sometimes to be careful wid her. But if she is

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sleeping now, dat is goot. And zo, John Smit, you ant I can get to pusiness."

He indicated a chair near the table for John, and then drew another close up for himself. The two men were thus placed face to face, their knees almost touching.

"You will take a trop of whisky?" said Uncle Michael, by way of opening the proceedings in proper form.

John replied that he could not possibly drink spirits at that hour in the morning.

"Den I will take a moutful—just a moutful." The good gentleman poured himself out a quantity that might have been measured rather to the mouth of a Gargantua than to that of an ordinary mortal, drank it at a draught, and smacked his lips. John noticed that his hand was exceedingly unsteady. His whole appearance suggested a sleepless night. "Dat is for de success of your journey," he remarked, with a benign smile, "ant—ant for your quick ant safe return." He pressed his temples for a moment, as if his head was throbbing. "Now, den, let us go to work in a regular, pusiness-like way. First, you will take a cap from here, ant trive straight town to Holborn Station—*hein!* De Paris express leafes"—he took an *A.B.C. Railway Guide* from the table, and opened it where a page was turned down—"at elefen o'clock—yaw, at elefen exactly. You get to Dofer at twelf-fifty—dat is ten minutes to one. It only takes you a leetle more dan an hour and a quarter to cross to Calais. As you haf no luggage to speak of—"

"Nothing but a small bag," said John.

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"Yaw, as you haf nodings but a small bak, you won't haf any tifficulty at de *douane*—de Custom-house, you know. At Calais you fint a train alreaty waiting for you. Dere is no troubles about it—you just step in. Den all you haf to do is to sit dere till you get to Paris. Dat is all clear—*hein!*"

He handed John the *Guide*, that he might satisfy himself of the accuracy of these statements.

"Yes, that's all plain sailing," said John, thinking that it *did* seem wonderfully easy and simple—to talk about.

"Yaw, quite plain sailing. Goot! You reach Paris at seven—"

"Yes, at seven," John concurred from the timetable.

"At seven precisely—yaw! You get dere py de *Gare du Nord*—"

"By the—"

"Py de *Gare du Nord*—de Nortern Railway Station, you know. Dat is in de Boulevard Magenta, close to de Rue Lafayette."

John nodded, because Uncle Michael appeared to expect him to acknowledge this intelligence in some way. Naturally enough, however, it conveyed no meaning to him.

"Den dere is no more troubles. You just call a cap—"

"Oh, I just call a cab, do I?" said John dubiously.

Things were beginning to get interesting. The Paris cabman was a monster of whom he had already heard tales, vague as to detail, but not the less alarming.

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"Yaw, yaw ; you just call a cap, and you gif de *cocher* de address—"

"That's all very well," said John ; "but I don't speak a word of French, you know."

Uncle Michael's face grew radiant. He drew a folded sheet of notepaper from his pocket, and handed it to John.

"I have tought of eferydings," he said, slapping his companion triumphantly on the knee. "Dere is de address, all written out clear. You gif dat to de *cocher* ; he understands ; he drifes you straight dere. You haf no more troubles—*hein!*"

John looked blankly at the address.

"The fellow will be sure to know where this is, I suppose?" he remarked, still foreseeing possibilities of difficulty.

Uncle Michael laughed.

"Of course, he will know—yaw. You need not boter yourself, John Smit. You just sit in your cap, and he will take you straight dere."

John folded the precious paper, and put it carefully away in his purse, which he restored to his trousers pocket.

"Is it far from the station?" he inquired.

"It will take you dree quarters of an hour, I tare-say. Perhaps not so much—perhaps a leetle more. You should be dere by eight o'clock."

"And then—"

"Ant den you pay de capman ; you gif him tree francs if you like ; dat will satisfy him ; and you go up to the fourt floor—"

"The fourth floor," repeated John, anxious to make

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certain of every detail of the directions, and to lodge it once and for all in his memory.

"Yaw, yaw ; M. Bergerat lifs in a flat, you know—*au quatrième*. M. Bergerat, dat is de name. You fint him dere. Dere is no more troubles. You tell him you kom from Uncle Michael. You gif him de paper. Dat is all."

"But does M. Ber—does he understand English ?" asked John.

"Yaw, yaw ; he understands English. He speaks it as well as you or me." And Uncle Michael smiled expansively

"Then there'll be no difficulty there," said John, sincerely wishing himself already in M. Bergerat's apartments. "And after that—"

"After dat, you just leaf yourself in M. Bergerat's hands. I cannot say what he will do wit you. He will do whatever is best. You will probably stay wid him dat night. Yaw, yaw ; I guess so, but I do not know. If he tinks dere is still time for you to take de paper on to de lawyers at once, you will take it. If not, you will take it de first ting in de morning. He will know. You just leaf yourself in his hands, and do what he says. You understand—*hein* ?"

"I understand," said John.

"Goot ! And after you haf done what he says, dere is an end of de matter. You kom pack to London as soon as efer you like. Dere will be nodings to keep you."

"It will be of no use my staying," John suggested, "on the chance of my being wanted for something else ?"

"No, no ; dat will make nodings. When you haf

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taken de paper to M. Bergerat, and afterwarts to his frients, the lawyers, dat is all you haf to do. Dere will be no more trouple. Ant now, John Smit"—he thrust his hand into his trousers pocket, and drew out a worn leather purse—"you cannot trafel witout money, you know."

"I have ten pounds with me," said John, "surely I shan't need more?"

"But it is not for you to pay. You are not going on a pleasure-trip," and the old man laughed softly. "See here!" He turned the contents of the purse out on the table, and began to pick them over. "Dere's five pounds in English golt. You puy a return ticket—*hein?* And den dere's some French golt and silver. Dese are twenty franc pieces—dese are ten—dese are two francs—dese are one. You take dem all. It will prevent you from hafing de boter of changing money—*hein?*" Despite John's protests, he poured them all into his hands. "What you don't use, you can gif me again when you get pack. Haf a trop of whisky? No! Den I will take just a moutful. It is kolt dis morning—*hein?* Dere! Dat is again to your safe journey and quick return. Goot!" And Uncle Michael chuckled and rubbed his hands.

John separated the English money from the French money, and put the one lot into his left hand trousers pocket, the other into his right.

"And now, all I want is the paper," he said.

"Yaw—de paper." Uncle Michael began to fumble nervously inside his waistcoat. "Dat is all you want now," he said slowly; but he drew his hand out empty. John noticed that the colour had

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left his cheeks. "You are quite sure dat dis is not going to gif you too much trouple—*hein?*" He leaned forward, and looked at John keenly.

"I have told you that I am ready to do this, or anything else, to help Victorine."

"Dat is zo—dat is zo. To help Victorine! Goot! Fery goot!" Again he fumbled inside his waistcoat, and this time brought forth a square envelope of ordinary size. He passed his fingers along the gummed edge at the back, scrutinised the address, turned it over two or three times, and handed it to John.

"Is this all?" asked John.

"Yaw, yaw; dat is all. I see I haf fastened it down accidentally; but no matters. I intended to show it to you, but I haf fastened it witout tinkin'. But no matters. It is in French, so you woult not understand it."

John held the envelope for a moment, reading the inscription. It was addressed simply to M. Bergerat, and bore neither the name of the street nor any other direction.

"It's quite a small document," he remarked, turning it over curiously.

Uncle Michael smiled and nodded.

"Dere is not much of it," he acknowledged, "but enough. Yaw, yaw; quite enough! I gif it to you because—because you luf Victorine, and I can trust you—*hein?* Now what will you to wit it?"

"I shall just put it inside my pocket-book," answered the young man, suiting the action to the word. "It will be quite safe then."

Uncle Michael watched the proceeding with every sign of interest. Not a movement escaped him.

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"Goot!" he said, when John had buttoned up his coat. "Fery goot!" He sprang to his feet, hastened across the room, and opened the door. "Yaw, yaw, I kom," he shouted into the passage; and then to John: "Dere is Mrs. Poppy, who calls me town pelow. I must speak wit her one minute. You stay here, John Smit. I kom directly again."

He hurried from the room, and John heard him shuffling down the stairs. Then the young man got up, and walking to the window, looked out into the dingy street. But he did not care for the muddy pavements beneath him; the two slatternly women in shrill dispute outside the public-house just over the way; the soot and the sleet which were beginning to come down together, and to cover everything with a black, sticky slime. His attention was too much preoccupied with what had just passed; with Uncle Michael's manifest nervousness; with what still impressed him as a distinct lack of frankness amid all the details with which he had been entrusted; with the various particulars he had to remember and attend to for his own safety and success in the coming expedition. Yet, after all, he told himself, he was probably worrying himself without any cause. The sense of mystery which had come over him last night, and which hung even more heavily upon him this morning, was most likely the result of his own abnormal mental condition. Uncle Michael was a foreigner, and had a foreigner's odd and inexplicable way of dealing with things; he was nearly wild with anxiety over the reverses with which Victorine was threatened, and for which, in a sense, he seemed to hold himself personally responsible. If he was

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nervous, then, and a little irritable—if he conducted himself strangely, was queer in his talk, and showed too constant a tendency to have recourse to the whisky-bottle, it was only what might have been expected. It would be absurd to make trouble when no trouble really existed. His (John's) own part in the matter was perfectly simple. He had to take this little document, now resting snugly in his inner coat pocket, to a given address in Paris ; and after that—

“John !”

He turned in astonishment, to find himself face to face with a slight, trembling figure, wrapped in a thin, dark, dressing-gown.

“My darling !” he exclaimed, seizing both the girl's hands. “How did you come here? They told me you were ill.”

“I am ill,” answered Victorine, in a strange, broken voice—“very ill ! I have not slept all night.” Her appearance certainly did not belie her words. Her face was white and haggard, save where her cheeks were touched with the hectic flush of fever. Her lips were drawn as if in physical anguish. Her eyes were unnaturally large and bright.

“You ought not to be here,” he said, forgetting all his own difficulties in his anxiety for her. “You must go straight back to bed. You must, indeed. Why, your hands are like ice, and you are shivering all over. You—stay, I will call Aunt Anna !”

“No, no,” she whispered hoarsely, clutching him by the arm. “Don't do that for God's sake, John. I must have a word with you before Michael Goszczynski comes back.” It did not occur to him till afterwards

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that there was something odd in her thus for the first time speaking of him by his full name, instead of calling him Uncle Michael. "Hush!" She turned to listen, still holding him by the arm. "He may be here directly, and he must not find me with you. They did not want me to see you this morning."

"Why not?" demanded John, in dull astonishment. "They said you were asleep—that you ought not to be disturbed—that—that— Good heavens, Victorine, what is the meaning of this?"

"Never mind what the meaning is—now, John," was the rapid reply. "You will understand everything soon. But tell me—are you going?"

"Am I—"

"Are you going to Paris to-day?"

"Of course I am!"

"Then Michael Goszczyński has not changed his mind?"

"Changed his mind! What should make him change his mind?"

"Hush!" Again she turned to listen. "John, there is no time to waste! There is nothing for it now. You must go, as he tells you to, and do whatever he directs. That is the only way left you. Has he given you the—the paper?"

"Yes," answered John, "I have it in my pocket-book."

"Then give it to me!"

"Give it to you, Victorine?"

"Give it to me at once." She spoke in a tone of command. "Don't I tell you there's no time to waste?" She seized the envelope with trembling fingers, and hid it in her bosom. The next moment

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she had drawn thence another envelope, and of exactly the same size, shape, and general appearance. "There!" she exclaimed, thrusting this into his hands, "put that into your pocket-book instead of the one I have taken. And not a word—not a syllable, mind—to anyone of what I have done, or even that you have seen me." She watched his every movement with fixed intentness, until the substituted envelope was safely in the pocket-book, the pocket-book safely in his pocket, and his coat again buttoned up. "Now all that you have to do is to follow Michael Goszczynski's instructions to the letter; and when you see Eugène Trapadoux—I mean, M. Bergerat—without a word of explanation, you are to give him what I have given you. You understand?"

"No," returned John blankly, "I don't understand at all. Victorine, you must tell me what all this is about. If there is anything strange, I ought to know. If there is any mystery—and surely there is—"

But the girl cut him short.

"As you love me, John, do exactly as I have said." As she spoke, a door opened in the lower hall, and there came to them the sound of several voices mingled in conversation. "He is coming," Victorine exclaimed excitedly. "I trust you, mind, John! Good-bye!"

She threw her arms about him, and kissed him passionately on the lips. In his confusion, careless of what might happen, he would have held her there, dazed with the wild delight of feeling her absolutely his own. But with a snake-like movement she slid from his embrace.

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“Good-bye!” she whispered again, “good-bye, John! I never knew how much I loved you till now!”

The next moment she was gone.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHICH TELLS OF JOHN SMITH'S SAFE JOURNEY TO
PARIS, AND OF THE PLEASANT RECEPTION
WHICH AWAITED HIM THERE

ON shuffling back into the room, Uncle Michael looked at John sharply.

"I am sorry I haf kept you waiting so long," he said.

"Oh, don't mention it!" John replied. "There's no very special hurry, you know."

Uncle Michael feigned to be searching for something among the papers on the table.

"I tought I heart you speaking wit sompody—*hein?*" he said suddenly.

In a moment of emergency, a kind of blind instinct will sometimes come to the rescue, in a way which, in retrospect, may well fill one with surprise.

"I don't know why you should have thought so," said John coolly; "unless perhaps I may have been talking to myself. I occasionally do that. It's a silly habit of mine."

"It is a fery bat hapit," the old man curtly rejoined. He seemed on the point of adding something to this remark, and stood for a moment with his eyes fixed on his companion. But John met his gaze without

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flinching, and Uncle Michael began to forage among the papers again.

There was an awkward silence of two or three minutes.

"He guesses, or at any rate fancies, that Victorine has been here," thought John uneasily. "Why is it that they're all so anxious she shouldn't see me this morning? Has it anything to do with this letter? Confound it, I have more than half a mind to challenge the old fellow, and declare that till he's made a clean breast of all this plaguey business I won't stir another inch."

He slipped over to the table with a question on his lips which, for good or evil, would have absolutely changed the subsequent course of his adventures; but on the instant, he recalled the command which Victorine herself had laid upon him. Loyal to her, whatever might be the consequence, his simple duty lay in keeping silent, waiting till the explanation of the present mystery should come of itself, and meanwhile following her explicit directions. And so the question was never put. Instead of that, John said very quietly:

"I suppose now that I might just as well start?"

"You haf eferyting reaty?" asked Uncle Michael.

"Everything. I left my coat and hat, and bag, and so on downstairs. By the way, I shall, of course, come to see you directly I get back?"

"Yaw, yaw; of course you will. Tirectly. We shall all want to know how—how you haf got on. You take a cap to the station—*hein*?"

"I shall take the first one I find. But I have heaps of time. Good-bye!" He held out his hand.

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"Stop a minute. You haf de—de paper all right—*hein*?"

"Yes, yes; that's all right," John replied, patting his chest.

"Let me see it," said Uncle Michael. "I want to know it is all right."

Do what he would, John could not prevent his fingers from trembling and bungling a little as he unbuttoned his coat. Once more the instinct of the moment lent him assistance. He drew out his pocket-book and opened it wide, in such a way, however, that the letter lay, address downward, with nothing to distinguish it from that for which it had been substituted.

Uncle Michael leaned forward, looked at the envelope, stretched out his hand, and took it for a moment in his fingers, while John held his breath.

"Yaw, yaw; put it pack safely—so! Now you will not haf to take out dat pocket-pook again till you reach Paris—*hein*?"

"No, not till I reach Paris," answered John reassuringly; and he added to himself, "He does not really suspect there is anything amiss with this letter? He was nervous about it, and wanted to have just one more peep; that was all."

"Den goot-pye, John Smit, goot-pye! You kom to see us tirectly you get pack. You haf no more trouples now, and you take just a moutful of whisky before you go, to keep out de raw air? No? Well, goot-pye!"

John took one rapid glance round the room which had been the scene of so many delicious experiences,

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and which, though he little guessed it then, was destined to live strangely in his memory as he saw it that morning ; then he hastened downstairs.

Uncle Michael shambled after him to the end of the landing, and then stopped, watching him over the bannisters, and repeatedly calling, in a hoarse sort of whisper, "Goot-pye, John Smit, goot-pye!"

"So you are off, John!"

It was Aunt Anna, who came plump upon him from the lower room as he was busy gathering up his things in the dark passage.

"Yes, I'm off; but I'm coming to see you all as soon as ever I get back. But I hope Victorine will be quite herself again then." His intensity of excitement enabled him to carry things off with splendid nonchalance.

To his astonishment, Aunt Anna began to cry.

"You don't mean that you think she's going to be really ill?" said John, in alarm. He had but one interpretation to put upon Aunt Anna's collapse.

"No, no," blubbered the good woman softly; "she will be all right, John; she will be all right! But—but I'm sorry you have to go; that's all. You—you will catch cold; and—and have you any sandwiches with you, and a flask of brandy?"

"I've everything I want," answered John, "and I shall have a bit of lunch at Holborn, to set me up for the journey down to Dover. There's plenty of time for that. So good-bye till the day after to-morrow, and look after Victorine for me!"

"Good-bye!" returned Aunt Anna, with a gulp; and then, if she had surprised the young man before

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by bursting into tears, she surprised him still more now by what she did. She clasped him suddenly—coat, umbrella, bag, and all—in her arms, and gave him a wet, motherly kiss.

As John hurried away down the court, he turned to have a last look at the dirty house which the magic of love had changed for him into an enchanted castle. Was he right, or was he wrong, in fancying that he caught, between the slats of the Venetian blinds at one of the upper windows, a momentary glimpse of a white girlish face? Perhaps it was only imagination. But it gave him a keen pleasure afterwards to think that Victorine had indeed stood there to watch him to the last.

He had not to walk far before he found a disengaged hansom, by means of which he reached Holborn Station, with nothing more exciting to break the monotony of the journey than a spirited, though brief altercation, carried on in picturesque phraseology, between his own Jehu and the driver of an omnibus, arising from the fact that each man wanted to get the advantage of the other in the most crowded part of the route. Arrived at the station, his first concern was with the precautionary lunch, for which, unfortunately, he could muster very little appetite; and over which he hurried, from a dread, characteristic of all amateur travellers, lest he might, through some unlooked-for catastrophe, be late for his train. The result was, that when he emerged from the restaurant he discovered he had a full hour left on his hands; and everybody is aware that an hour on a railway platform, with nothing to do, is as long as six hours under any other circum-

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stances. In his restlessness and agitation, he was at a total loss as to how to kill time. First of all, he wandered out into Holborn, but there it was so wet, and cold, and miserable that he soon beat a retreat. He thought he would treat himself to the luxury of a cigar, with which in his mouth he began to pace up and down the draughty platform ; but the threepenny weed did not give him half the satisfaction that he never failed to find in his own briar-pipe, which he now suddenly realised, to his dismay, he had left on the mantelpiece in his bedroom. Then he purchased one of those silly penny-worths of miscellaneous clippings and personal gossip, which stand in the place of literature for people of weak or untrained intellects ; but the scrappy columns, with their dismal attempts at smartness, failed altogether to hold his attention, and he turned from one vulgar picture to another without caring to know what they were about. By this time a conviction came upon him that the big station clock must have stopped, and he was only persuaded that it had not done so by a minute comparison between it and his own watch. It was so utterly absurd to suppose that only fifteen minutes had gone by ! A little diversion was now introduced by the approaching departure of a train ; and he watched with an intense interest, born of boredom and vacuity, the moist passengers in their rush for the gate ; the porters labelling the luggage and wheeling it off for their trucks ; an old lady, with two bird-cages, and a small hamper which looked very much as if it might contain a dog or a cat, and which evidently aroused some official suspicion ; a husband and wife sharply accusing each other of

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having dropped the tickets, which between them, had somehow got lost.

When the little crowd had dispersed, and the train was off, John felt as if an element of real importance had been blotted out of his life. He turned aimlessly away from the spot where it might almost have seemed that he had taken root, and then an awful thought struck him like a lightning flash. What a fool he was to be wandering about in such a public place! Supposing the "governor" should chance to come along? or Mr. Boroughgate? or any of the fellows at the office? It was useless for him to remind himself that never, to his certain knowledge, had any one of those gentlemen ever appeared at that time of the day at the Holborn Station. The vague fear of being seen and recognised by someone was enough to set all his nerves on edge, and to force home upon him again, what for the time being he had forgotten—the secret nature of his present escapade. Tapping his breast pocket for the fiftieth time to assure himself of the safety of his pocket-book, and throwing his half-smoked cigar away in disgust, he walked straight into the first-class waiting-room—a room with a close family likeness to that in which he had had that first memorable interview with Victorine. It was dark and clammy, and almost deserted. With the fear of detection uppermost for the moment in his mind, he drew his hat down over his eyes, and made himself as comfortable as he could in a corner. There, at least, he was out of people's way; there, at least, he could live again in memory through every detail of that evening—how long ago it seemed now!—when

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he and she had sat together as it might be yonder (he pictured the scene), and he had enjoyed the delicious consciousness of having at last, after so many failures and so much despair, brought her back once more out of the vastness and chaos of London into his life. Yet how little he had dreamed then that fortune would ever smile upon his love! She had seemed so far away from his world—a creature of such strange beauty and such alien charm—that he had never dared to fancy it could be his privilege to woo and win her, and to call her indeed his own. And now that which had appeared altogether impossible had actually come to pass. Those old visions of romance which he had used to conjure up for himself in the dull routine of an existence against whose narrow and sordid conditions his whole spirit had been in revolt, had vanished away, only to give place to a more brilliant, a more romantic reality. And like one of those heroes whose fictitious careers he had been accustomed to follow with such breathless interest, he was, as it were, by one act of courage and self-sacrifice (for so in that inspired moment he chose to regard his journey), about to prove himself worthy of the love of her to whom his love had been given. “When I get back,” said John to himself, “I shall feel that I have indeed done something to deserve her.” That thought filled him with a great joy. The mystery which surrounded his enterprise, his doubts and anxieties concerning it, were temporarily forgotten, and all the future grew radiant with golden promises and hopes.

But as other heroes besides John Smith have discovered, it is one thing to sit in a corner and indulge

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in romantic daydreams of achievement and reward, and quite another to step down into the world's common life, and face the practical details of the appointed task. No sooner was John settled in his second-class compartment than all the old nervousness and unrest returned upon him. The realisation that he was still in the dark as to the exact nature and purpose of his mission gave full opportunity for the play of imaginary fears ; and these were none the less harrassing because they were utterly vague. Not knowing what to expect, he felt that danger might be lurking on every side ; not knowing what to dread, he dreaded everything. Though he would have been totally unable to assign any definite reason for his conduct, he scrutinised, with the deepest anxiety, every individual who passed down the platform ; experienced a sudden qualm when anyone stopped for a moment before his carriage door ; and breathed a sigh of relief when he went on again. Even the innocuous guard's official glance in at the window seemed, for the moment, to have something behind it ; and the hurried arrival of a gentleman who, at first sight, looked a little like Mr. Werry, though, on nearer view, he turned out to be a totally different kind of person, literally set him trembling in every limb.

All this did not constitute exactly an auspicious beginning for his journey ; which, none the less, was destined to be a very tame and uneventful affair. Few people, it appeared, were starting for Paris by that train, and he had his compartment entirely to himself right down to Dover. There he easily found his way on board the boat ; and being in great uncertainty as

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to his seamanship, he at once retired to the general cabin, and made himself as comfortable as he could on one of the couches. No one took the slightest notice of him there, and, on the whole, he behaved himself quite as well as he had expected. There was a good deal of sea in the Channel, and the steamer tossed and rolled confoundedly ; but though he more than once experienced indubitable intimations of coming disaster, he continued, by keeping very quiet, to ward off a positive attack of that much-dreaded complaint at which everyone feels at liberty to smile complacently save those who are actually in its grip. At Calais, again, he found no difficulty awaiting him. The light was already beginning to fail, and a thick haze clung about the coast, so that he could enjoy little of that emotion with which we are apt to take our first view of a foreign shore ; nor, indeed, under the circumstances of his journey, was there much chance for him to indulge himself in any such traveller's luxury. Of two feelings only was he specially conscious on landing, and making his way through the Custom-house : one was a general sense of forlornness and home-sickness, such as is almost certain to beset anyone who realises for the first time in his life that he is among total strangers ; the other, a shock of surprise over the fact that everybody was chattering French, combined with a sort of pity for the unfortunate folk who were shut out from the privilege of his own tongue. However, when he had succeeded in making the Customs officer understand that the little bag he carried in his hand represented the sum-total of his luggage, the examination was the merest matter of form ; and before long he found

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himself ensconced in a corner seat in a second-class compartment in the Paris express. Once more he was left entirely to himself—a circumstance which filled him with the greatest satisfaction, as the train presently swung out into the deepening dusk. Then, mile after mile, the country between Calais and the capital flew by him—fields, white under their mantle of snow ; half-outlined villages, with their scattered lights ; stretches of mysterious landscape, out of which the eye could make nothing ; towns which, even to the wayfarer rushing past them, seemed full of the warmth and charm of human life. At Amiens alone the train made a short stop, and there John was less interested in the brief glimpse of a fresh world offered to him than in the chances that his solitude might, perchance, be at length invaded. But the Fates continued to favour him ; he was still left undisturbed.

In one other respect, however, he was now doomed to misfortune. At Amiens he had noticed with misgiving signs of increasing fog, to the significance of which he, as a Londoner, was only too keenly alive. After leaving that station, the train began to slow up ; crept cautiously along at a snail's pace for a couple of miles or so ; and then came to a complete standstill for nearly half an hour. At Creil, which was reached long after time, the fog was still denser, and a wearisome pause was made just outside the station. Seven o'clock came, and with it an ever-diminishing likelihood of their ever reaching their destination. Impatience, anxiety, loneliness, all sorts of dismal forbodings, made John fret and chafe at the exasperating delay ; he gazed hopelessly into the

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thick night, now from one window, and now from the other ; he grew, with every passing moment, colder, hungrier, more nervous, more abjectly miserable. If he could only have got out and done something ! If he could only have exchanged a few intelligible words of commiseration or encouragement with any living creature ! But to sit there and wait—wait—wait—with aching fingers and frozen feet, alone in a silence and solitude hardly to be borne : it was terrible ! Ah, they were moving again at last ! He would have given anything to know what all those men on the track were talking about ! He could see them gesticulating wildly ; he could hear their high-pitched speech ; but, alas, it meant nothing to him, save that it gave him a heavier sense of his own complete isolation. Still, they were moving—that was one comfort ! And then, crawling and halting, halting and crawling, the train presently felt its way out of the fog into a comparatively clear air, after which the speed was increased to what seemed like the usual rate of running. But the only comfort brought to the passengers thereby was in the feeling that, at least, no more time would be wasted ; over the time already lost it was idle to grieve. When at length they drew up in the splendid terminus of the Northern Railway, it was close on eleven o'clock. They were nearly four hours late.

And now John, chilled to the bone, numb to the finger-tips, ravenous from his protracted fast and exposure, altogether more dead than alive, pulled himself together as well as he could, and stared defiantly about him. At this point, as he felt, his adventures were really going to begin ; and, indeed,

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he at once had plenty to engage his attention. First of all came a most unsatisfactory interview with a porter, who rolled out long sentences, of which, of course, John could not understand a syllable, and at whom he could only shake his head. Still the porter chattered and gesticulated, pointing now to the young man's bag and now to the train; and after a while, John made out, or fancied he made out, that the man was questioning him about the rest of his luggage. Whereupon he held up his bag, and said "*Nong*," and shook his head more vigorously than ever. More eloquence from the porter followed, but whether the theme of it all was something connected with John himself, or with the lateness of the train, or with the international affairs of France and England, the bewildered Cockney had not the remotest idea. "*Je ne parle pas français*," he said again and again, with laborious distinctness, adding, with a weak lapse into his own vocabulary, "*Cab—cab!*" Then a bright idea struck him. He relinquished his bag to his companion, who had made several efforts to possess himself of it, and drew from his trouser pocket the paper on which Uncle Michael had written M. Bergerat's address. This he gave the porter to read. "*Ah, oui, oui, monsieur*," said that excitable individual, and off he started across the station, with John in full chase. In half a minute they had emerged into the open; in half a minute more a cabman was perusing Uncle Michael's directions. "*Rue des Trois Petites Sœurs, 27, près Boulevard Voltaire. Bien, monsieur*." John stepped into the cab, handed the porter the first French coin he could lay his fingers upon (he afterwards fancied it must

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have been a two-franc piece), and the next minute was rolling and jolting at breakneck speed down the Boulevard Magenta.

It was never of the slightest use for anyone to ask John afterwards about his first impressions of Paris. All he could ever recall was a sort of mad rush along broad streets, a confused blur of lights and shops and houses, and a babel of unfamiliar sounds. How long that fateful drive had lasted, he could not even remember—he only knew that it had seemed to him as if it never would come to an end. At last, however, the cab turned out of the great avenue into a narrower thoroughfare, and out of this again into one that was very narrow indeed, and likewise, he noted, exceedingly ill-lighted. Something told him—perhaps the recollection of Quemby Court suggested the idea—that this must be the Rue des Trois Petites Sœurs. Nor was he wrong. For only a hundred yards or so from the last corner, the cab stopped with a lurch, and the *cocher* descended from his seat. John recklessly handed him a few coins, and the cab turned and rattled away. And here he was, then, at his destination—colder, number, hungrier than ever, and all alone in a dark, deserted street, down which the wind whistled and moaned, as now it rose to a shrill blast, and now died away into a melancholy cadence like that of some dumb creature in pain.

John's heart sank within him. He looked down the street into the darkness, and up the street towards the broader thoroughfare out of which he had just come. He looked at the house before which he had been planted so unceremoniously, and which seemed to frown at him from all its blank, unlighted windows ;

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and then he looked up and down the street again. And his first impulse was to sit down upon the pavement, and give way to his feeling of utter loss and bewilderment, and despair ; his second, to turn and fly—somewhere, anywhere, provided it were only out among the lights and bustle of life again, and in the direction of home.

Perhaps it would have been well if he had obeyed that latter wild instinct to escape. But naturally enough, his hesitation was of brief duration. To sit on the pavement would do him no good ; and of what use would it be to rush out into that vast world of Paris, where no one knew him or cared for him, and where he would have not a soul to turn to for guidance or help ? In that dark house there was at least someone who, for the sake of Uncle Michael and Victorine, and his errand, would give him, as he had every reason to believe, a kind, perhaps a hearty welcome ; who would doubtless have a fire and something to eat ; who at least—blessed thought !—could understand English and speak it. He pulled the bell energetically, and was rather surprised by the rapid appearance of the *concierge*.

“Oui, oui, monsieur, au quatrième,” said that fat little man, reading Uncle Michael’s directions by the light of his candle. And then—John could have embraced him for it—he broke into English of a sort : “I kom vid you to show you de vay.”

Up one long, narrow flight of stairs after another they went together, the *concierge* first with his candle, and John close on his heels.

“It is ’ere, monsieur,” said the former, finally stopping on a landing, much out of breath with the

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ascent. "You knock. I tink M. Bergerat expect you. Good-night!"

John knocked, tremulously at first, then louder; and upon the second application, the door was opened cautiously, and John found himself face to face with a tall, slim, middle-aged gentleman, with a little pointed beard, and hair brushed straight back from his forehead.

"Oh, I beg pardon! Are—are you M. Bergerat?" asked John.

"That is my name, sir," replied the other, in perfectly good English, though with an unmistakable French accent. "May I ask your business?"

The gentleman's manner was courteous enough, but by no means effusive.

"I am John Smith, from London," John explained. "I come on behalf of—of Uncle Michael and Victorine."

A bow and a faint smile acknowledged this declaration.

"I am glad to see you, sir—very glad to see you! Pray be at the trouble of stepping in. Though Michael Goszczynski intimated that I was to expect you to-night, I must confess that I had my suspicions about your coming. It is unpleasant weather for travelling."

"It isn't exactly the kind of weather when one would choose to travel just for the fun of the thing," John replied, a little piqued.

He could have wished M. Bergerat just a trifle less distant and stately. It was rather disappointing not to have the offer of even a shake of the hand.

"And surely you are very late," M. Bergerat

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continued. "I was told to expect you about eight o'clock. I have been long waiting for you, and had about given you up."

"We were delayed by fog," said John curtly. He was on the point of adding that if M. Bergerat, with his cosy room and his pleasant fire, felt cause for dissatisfaction, he, John, had certainly something to make a fuss about. But he checked the sentence ere it reached his lips; for the delight of feeling that he had at last arrived, and in safety, was so intense that the irritation aroused by the peculiarities of his newly-made friend was of short duration. It was probable, he told himself, that the Frenchman would thaw out presently. And for the moment what an unspeakable relief it was to pass out of the wet, cold, windy street into the cheery light and warmth of M. Bergerat's apartments. The bright fire in the grate, the red-shaded lamp on the central table, the close-drawn curtains, gave him a lively sense of home.

His host shut the door carefully behind them.

"You have brought something for me from Michael Goszczynski, I believe," he said quietly. He was evidently so anxious about John's mission that he had no thought to spare for such a minor matter as his personal comfort.

"I have brought a letter," John replied, dropping his voice to a whisper.

"Then will you kindly give it to me, sir? We may as well settle our little business at once."

John hesitated, with a slight but significant turn of the head towards the further corner of the room.

"Oh, you need not trouble yourself about him,"

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returned the other, following the young man's doubtful glance in the direction of a third person, who was sitting with his back towards the door, and just outside the small round island of light made by the lamp. "He is a friend of ours, and quite in our confidence."

Thus reassured, John drew out his pocket-book, opened it, carefully extracted the envelope, and handed the same to M. Bergerat. That gentleman held it for a moment under the lamp, turned it over once or twice, and critically examined the address.

"Did Michael Goszczynski give you this?" he inquired, with a just perceptible sharpening in his tones.

"Yes," answered John. "At least—"

He paused in some confusion. He was still so cold and dazed that he could not be sure of Victorine's final instructions.

"At least—" M. Bergerat repeated.

"At least, Victorine gave it to me."

"Oh, she gave it to you, did she? Well, I imagine that it's all one and the same, isn't it? This is, at any rate, the document with which you were entrusted for Eugène Trapadoux?" He glanced at John quickly.

"For M. Bergerat," John corrected, in some surprise.

Then, in a moment, he remembered that Victorine had just mentioned that second name, and had speedily substituted that of Bergerat.

"Ah!" Again the Frenchman looked at him steadily. "Well, even now I imagine that it's all one and the same."

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He tore open the envelope, and hastily ran his eye over the contents of the single sheet of letter-paper which he took from it. John fancied that a shade of disappointment passed over his face.

"Mr. Staplehurst!" he said quietly.

The third person, thus addressed, turned slowly, rose from his seat, and came forward into the light. His face at once struck John as curiously familiar, with its close-cut grey side-whiskers, its fresh pink cheeks, its clean-shaven upper lip and chin, though for the moment he was at a total loss to know where he could have seen it before. Then it suddenly flashed upon him that this was the suave and kindly gentleman from the West of England, to whom he had played the part of good Samaritan on the night of that first visit of his to Quemby Court. But what in the world could he be doing there?

"You are satisfied?" this gentleman asked in his bland, mellow voice.

"Perfectly." The Frenchman indicated the letter. "This is the messenger you are expecting from the so-called Goszczynski party in London, and he is the bearer of a paper which I here hold in my hands. It remains to see whether he can give us what we need for decisive action. At any rate, the way is clear."

As he spoke, the *soi-disant* M. Bergerat stepped to the door, and took up his position with his back against it.

At the same moment, Mr. Staplehurst strode forward, and laid a heavy hand on John's shoulder.

CHAPTER XIX

IN WHICH BEN CHADWICK HAS THE MELANCHOLY
SATISFACTION OF BEING ABLE TO DECLARE
THAT HE HAD SAID SO ALL ALONG

"I WON'T stand it any longer! Confound it all, I won't!" said Mr. Benjamin Chadwick, leaning back in his chair, and thrusting both his hands as far as they would go into his trousers pockets. "It's getting past a joke! It's—hulloa, Mary, my dear! what's this? Not apple-pie?"

The slatternly, weak-eyed maid-of-all-work, who, with much satisfaction to herself, was wont to look after Mr. Chadwick's requirements during his evening repast, and who secretly regarded that gentleman with a romantic attachment, and as a sort of Chevalier Bayard and Admirable Crichton rolled into one, hastened to assure him that the dish she had just set on the table was indeed apple-pie.

"Then, bless your little heart, here goes!" said Ben, cutting down into the crisp crust with an ogre-like smile of anticipation. "Jeminy! but how good it looks! My love to Mrs. Bumpers, Mary, and tell her I won't forget her in my will."

Mary went off, giggling hysterically over one of the most sparkling witticisms she had ever heard in the course of a life in which witticisms had had an

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inconspicuous share, while Ben proceeded to devote himself, with a singleness of purpose worthy of the highest praise, to the good thing which providence had sent him as a reward for an unusually disagreeable day's work. Had anyone else been by, he would have heard, for ten minutes or more, nothing but the clatter of spoon or fork, and the regular champing of an unusually fine pair of jaws. At length the dish was cleared to the uttermost morsel, and then Ben, feeling, as he himself would have put it, for all the world like an alderman, pushed his plate away, and rose rather painfully to his feet. Like a wise man, he had dismissed all unpleasant thoughts from his mind so long as dinner had engaged his attention. Now he returned to the subject which had been so happily broken in upon by the apple-pie.

"I certainly won't stand it any longer," he repeated, half-aloud. "I'll lay ten to one that it's something to do with that gal. But, by hook or by crook, I'm going to find out. He may kick me out of doors if he likes ; but, hang it—"

He looked ferociously at the clock, threw some coal on the fire, rang the bell as a signal to Mary that she might "clear away" as soon as ever she found time to do so, put his tobacco-pouch in his pocket, seized his coat and hat, and, indifferent to the claims of digestion, started out at a good swinging pace in the direction of John Smith's.

He found Mrs. Smith alone in her little parlour, sewing, of course.

"John not come home yet?" he inquired, after learning, in answer to a preliminary question, that the good woman's condition of health was on the

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whole satisfactory, and assuring her, in turn, that he felt wonderfully "fit."

"Ah, then you have heard nothing from him about his business trip abroad?"

Ben stared at her open-mouthed.

"About his—"

"About his business trip abroad? Well, it was very sudden, or I am sure he would have seen you, or dropped you a post-card, or something. He left for Paris this morning."

Mrs. Smith made this statement with an air of no little importance. To have her son go to Paris was a fact about which she felt some natural pride.

"Well, I'm—I beg your pardon, Mrs. Smith," said Ben, checking himself in the very nick of time, "but it seems—well, it seems awfully rum, you know."

Whereupon Mrs. Smith proceeded to tell him all about it, laying particular emphasis upon the urgency of the matter which had called John away so unexpectedly, dwelling at some length on the circumstance that the case was one in which only a most trustworthy messenger could be sent, and glancing pointedly at the revelation which his selection had afforded of the high estimation in which he was held by his employers.

"If he manages well this time, it may mean a great deal to him in the future," remarked the good mother, darning away at one of her boy's socks. "You know, Mr. Chadwick, it will be a fine thing for him to get thoroughly into Mr. Werry's confidence. John does not push himself forward, as many young men do, but he has good, steady qualities; and when once they are found out, they are certain to be

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appreciated." And she looked across at John's friend with a quick, bright twinkle in her eyes which was very seldom seen there.

Ben wriggled in his chair, feeling thoroughly uncomfortable; stammered out a few broken sentences, intended to express the firmest faith in John's prospects; and after blundering about for some minutes in a vain attempt to carry on respectably his part in the conversation, rose abruptly, and took a hurried leave. Oh, yes, certainly! he would drop round again very soon. John was expected home in a day or two, was he? All right; he'd run in to hear at first hand all about his journey— Oh, don't trouble; he could find his way out, of course! Well, good-night!

"Office be damned!" ejaculated Ben, as soon as he got out into the street. "He won't come over me with any such rot as that!" He stopped to fill and light his pipe, during which operation he gave vent to several low, angry chuckles. "The idea of sending him to Paris on important business! He'll end by being sent on important business to the lunatic asylum! That's where he belongs."

When his lunch-hour came, the next day, Ben did not, as had been his habit these many years, turn into the little chop-house round the corner, where he was accustomed to refresh the inner man, and enjoy the exhilarating society of half-a-dozen choice spirits and the frizzy-headed waitress who called them all familiarly by name. Instead of that, he made his way as rapidly as possible to St. Mary Axe, and to the office of Werry & Co., shipping agents.

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"How d'ye do, young 'un?" he said pleasantly, as Carrots came forward to learn his errand. "Is the governor in, eh?"

Carrots, rather staggered, replied that Mr. Werry *was* in, but that he was just then engaged.

"And likely to be for fifteen hours yet, I suppose?" Mr. Chadwick continued facetiously.

Carrots faltered that he really did not know, but—

"Then don't disturb him," said Ben reassuringly. "I'll take my chance of finding him another day. But just tell Mr. Smith that I want to speak to him half a minute."

"Do you mean Mr. Fitzyou Vespasium?" inquired the red-haired youth, with a grin which seemed to involve and distort every single feature of his face.

That ancient joke was still a tradition in the office, and the native impudence of Master Carrots reasserted itself the moment he discovered that his somewhat baffling interlocutor was in search, not of the governor, but of one of the subordinates.

"Now, look here, young razor," said Ben severely, "I'll trouble you to keep your witticisms to yourself. You're too clever by half, and you know what happens to clever boys, don't you? They always die young, and have a marble slab put over 'em in the cemetery. So look out; and tell Mr. Smith that I want to see him."

"You can't see him," Carrots made answer, struggling against the grin that still would insist upon coming.

"Why not?"

"'Cos he ain't here."

At this point, a cross-eyed, spotty-faced young

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fellow—to wit, the would-be Lovelace, Mr. Starkins—sitting at the long desk on the further side of the office, tilted himself back on his high stool, at much risk, it might have seemed, of a broken neck, and thrusting his pen behind his ear, took stock of Ben.

“You’re looking for Smith?” he asked curtly.

Ben responded, as curtly, that he was.

“Well, he won’t be here for a day or two. An aunt of his has died in the country, and he has gone to look after her funeral.”

With which succinct statement, Mr. Starkins let his stool down with a jerk, resumed his pen, and returned to his columns of figures.

Mr. Chadwick stood for a moment irresolute, and then, without even a “Thank you,” walked away. His darkest misapprehensions were now substantiated. He had never for a moment believed in the alleged business in Paris, and now it was evident that while John had used this for a blind with his mother, he had fallen back upon an equally stupid story for the purpose of misleading his employers.

As Ben walked back to his own office, so much preoccupied that he never even troubled himself about the lunch he had foregone, his mind was a prey to the gloomiest thoughts. He had long enough been aware that something serious was amiss in the affairs of his friend, and if this knowledge had not deprived him of both appetite and sleep, it was not because it had not made him thoroughly miserable, but simply on account of the fact that, no matter what might be his troubles and anxieties, the good fellow’s physical machinery was wont to work away with little jar or interruption. He had, in truth, been very wretched

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indeed—wretched over the realisation that John was withholding his confidence from him at a time when he might have been of service, even more wretched over the sense of his own powerlessness, under the circumstances, to advise or help. “Something’s going to happen, I’ll take my oath on that,” he had said to himself, not once or twice, but scores of times during the past few weeks; “and when it comes, there’ll be the devil of a smash.” As to what form the smash was likely to take, he had never indeed paused to inquire very seriously; perhaps he had been well contented to allow his doubts to remain in the vague. Only now that, as he felt, the long-dreaded catastrophe had actually come, it had come in a shape so appalling that his liveliest vaticinations of evil would seem ludicrous beside the overwhelming reality. He had figured, at most, upon a love imbroglio, a little unpleasantness with a few foreigners, and perhaps an ill-advised marriage or unfortunate *liaison*. That would have been bad enough, in all conscience! But this! Why, it was awful!

For Ben, as he elbowed his way through the crowded city thoroughfare, and made perilous dives among cabs and omnibuses, soon sprang at what seemed to him a perfect obvious conclusion. John had gone—and gone for good. That was the general fact of the matter; it was impossible for the moment to fill in the details. Had he committed suicide? or fled to America? Had he eloped with the foreign gal who most indubitably had more than a little to do with this tragic affair? or had he simply made off with his employer’s cash-box? Such were the questions that buzzed in poor Ben’s brain, and

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made him indifferent to the pedestrians who shoved him on this side or that, and to the drivers who roared at him from their boxes. And to such questions there was at present no answer. A couple of days would have to pass before John's absence came to appear suspicious either to his mother or to the people at the office. Then folks would begin to ask what had become of him, inquiries would be instituted, the thing would assume the proportions of a mystery, the newspapers would get wind of the matter, the police would be communicated with, and— "O Lord! O Lord!" groaned the young man, "I knew that something would come of all John's damned nonsense—I've said so all along. But I didn't think it would be as bad as this! O Lord! O Lord! O Lord! And, confound it! I've never had a bit to eat, and"—he glanced at a clock he chanced to be passing—"yes, I've got five minutes. I must have a sandwich or a bit of bread and cheese."

"Piper, sir—evenin' piper—second edition—reported plot to assassinate the Emperor of Rooshia!" bawled a ragged urchin, over whom he nearly stumbled, as he made a sharp turn into a little lunch-room, up a side street.

He invested in a paper, not in the least because he wanted one, but simply because the youngster held it under his very nose, and his mind was too full at the moment to know or care what he was about. He opened it automatically as he sat waiting for his snack.

"A ham sandwich and a glass of bitter—and look sharp, miss, please!" he said; and began to glance aimlessly over the closely-packed columns.

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Then suddenly his eye was riveted by the following paragraph :—

“ RUMOURED PLOT AGAINST THE CZAR.

“ ALLEGED ACTIVITY OF ANARCHISTS IN LONDON.

“ It is reported that the police have been fortunate enough to discover in time the existence of an elaborate and well-concerted plot for the assassination of several of the crowned heads of Europe. Vigorous preparations appear to have been recently in progress in several of the Continental capitals, though the Czar of Russia had been selected as the first object of attack. It is further stated, on the most excellent authority, that the headquarters of the conspirators have been in London, where a number of dangerous Nihilists and political refugees, well known to the international police, have lately gathered together, and have been reinforced by several desperadoes from Chicago and Patterson, N.J. An important arrest was made late last night in Paris, when a young man giving the name of John Smith, or FitzHugh Vespasian Smith, but supposed to be a criminal for whom the detectives have long been in search, was neatly captured on his arrival there from London. He was on a mission to a Paris agent, who was himself arrested during the afternoon, and in whose rooms the alleged Smith found, from the detectives in possession, a different reception from what he had expected. He is said to have been the bearer of most important papers from the English Society, whose headquarters were for some time in Bloomsbury, and more recently somewhere in the neigh-

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bourhood of Islington. But the contents and significance of the documents found upon him have not yet been divulged."

When, leaving his sandwich untouched and his beer untasted, Ben Chadwick staggered down the room and out into the street, the few men who were still lunching there looked after him in speechless astonishment, thinking that he was either ill or drunk.

CHAPTER XX

IN WHICH THE POSTMAN BRINGS JOHN SMITH A CHRISTMAS MISSIVE FROM BEYOND THE SEA

IT took John Smith some little time and no little trouble to prove to the satisfaction of the learned and solemn representatives of the law, upon whose decision his fate was left to hang, that he was neither a red-handed conspirator against the social order, nor even a hardened villain of a more vulgar type, but simply an exceedingly absurd young man, who had had his brains turned by a pretty girl, and had permitted himself, in all the blindness of romantic love, to be used by her and her associates as an instrument in their nefarious schemes. At length, however, he succeeded in clearing his character of every charge against it, except that of egregious folly, and even in explaining away the mystery of his ridiculous *alias*, out of which at first it had seemed likely that serious complications might arise. To say that the motives which had dictated, or the considerations which had governed his conduct, when set forth baldly and in the abstract, appeared to anybody who studied the matter either rational or adequate, would, indeed, be going too far. But it presently came to be perfectly evident that he had acted as he had done, with little forethought, it is true, but still without criminal

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knowledge or intention. Upon which the case against him was dismissed, and he found himself once more a free man.

It is probable that the detective-police, who had been duly praised by the press for their activity and acumen, were not a little disconcerted and disquieted to find that they had expended their ingenuity in cleverly nabbing, not a political malefactor of first-rate importance, but only a commonplace, every-day kind of London clerk, who could not be made of the slightest service to them, who certainly did not put a feather in their caps, and whom they were at length only too happy to get out of the way. Their disappointment was, in fact, complete. For not only was John himself a totally uninteresting and worthless individual in their eyes, but even indirectly he could yield them no assistance in the further prosecution of their investigations. He had no information to give them which they could turn to practical use about the men and women he had so often met in Quemby Court, and of whose real characters and doings he had never, till the moment of his own arrest, had the smallest inkling. And as for the valuable documents which, it was fully expected, would be found upon him—well, there was nothing of much significance, surely, in a letter which, when translated from Polish into English, merely said—for that was absolutely all the envelope which John had carried with him to Paris contained—“Nothing can be done at present. Wait further instructions.—MICHAEL GOSZCZYNSKI.”

Even people who seek notoriety are apt sometimes to get rather too much of it. How much worse it

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must be, then, for those who, greatly against their own wishes, have notoriety suddenly forced upon them. For several days after his release, our ill-starred young man went about oppressed by the dismal knowledge that the newspapers, not one of which he dared so much as to glance at, were making free with his name, and, after their happy journalistic manner, creating a little cheap amusement at his expense. At first, he recoiled from even putting his nose outside his own door. He felt that everyone would recognise him as the unheroic hero of an utterly absurd romance. In the omnibus, in the railway carriage, in the crowded street, his haunting self-consciousness gave him not a moment's peace. Did anyone glance at him with what seemed a trifle more than the attention one ordinarily bestows upon a stranger, then the blood rushed to his cheeks, and his hand began to tremble. Did a passing couple turn on the pavement to take a second look at him, then he instantly imagined one saying to the other: "That's John Smith—or FitzHugh Vespasian, as he called himself—the stupid fellow who got mixed up with that Nihilist girl, you know, and came near landing himself in a precious scrape!" It was all morbid fancy, of course, for it is more than probable that all the while he was tormenting himself with the extravagant notion of publicity, the people across the way in the street in which he lived were totally unconscious of his identity. Who, in fact, does care anything about a person's identity in this huge world of London, where half the time one does not know even the name of one's next-door neighbour? But for a while, the matter threatened to make life intolerable

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for him, none the less. Fortunately, the passing days brought their customary relief. Little by little, as he learned from the faithful Ben, who was now a nightly visitor at Mrs. Smith's house, the incident dropped out of the newspapers. Having made their bit of "copy" out of it, they were ready to turn to the next sensation, and an opportune triple murder in Shore-ditch, with blood-curdling possibilities, materially helped to drive the Anarchist scare out of the journalistic mind. In a week, the very name of John Smith was altogether forgotten. *Sic transit!*

Still dazed and bewildered by his recent experiences—which, it will be admitted, were of a kind to shake stronger nerves than his—John returned to the dull routine of his daily existence, and found it, perchance, even in its very dulness, something of a relief after the wild stress and feverish excitement through which he had passed. His employers treated him, as he himself confessed, a great deal better than he deserved, and took him back into the office, though not until he had had a serious interview with Mr. Werry, and had given his solemn promise that he would be more careful in his choice of companions in the future. The "governor" was a shrewd business man, and withal kindly and sympathetic in his brusque Lancashire way; and having hitherto known John as, on the whole, an industrious and faithful servant—at all events, till the beginning of the incident which had come perilously near to ruining his life—he did not hesitate, believing him contrite, to give him another chance. John did not find it pleasant, as may readily be imagined, to mount his high stool again, and endure, as cheerfully as might

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be, the boisterous gibes and elephantine jocosities of Starkins and the rest. But the sting soon went even out of these ; while at home there was kindness, and care, and loving compassion enough to make ample amends for the rough treatment dealt out to him by his fellow-clerks. The good mother, though for many days she could never welcome him on his return from the city without dissolving in tears, never uttered a word that suggested reproach ; and evening after evening, Ben Chadwick appeared, pipe and all, to stretch out his legs, and chat entertainingly of this and that, in his cosy corner by the little parlour fire. If John was not happy, he was profoundly thankful. His whole nature went out in gratitude to mother and friend, though there was still, as he felt that there always must be, an emptiness and aching at the heart.

One night, impelled by a curiosity he had vainly striven to master, he did not go straight home from the office, but, instead, turned his steps in the direction of Quemby Court. How fiercely his heart beat against his ribs as he entered the dark, malodorous alley ! How strangely familiar everything looked there—the dingy, decaying houses, the blank wall at the end, the flaring “pub.” with its little group of besotted women and ragged children, just inside ! How vividly he remembered—was it a dozen years, or only a few weeks ago ?—the feelings with which he had hurried along that narrow, mud-spattered pavement, while the glow of love turned even the filth and wretchedness of the place to beauty, and the anticipation of meeting HER again—of holding her in his arms, of clasping her tightly to himself,

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of calling her his own then and for ever—had lent wings to his feet! Good God! was it possible that all this was only a dream, too lovely to last, yet altogether too perfect wholly to die away? Before that door, the sense of all he had lost came upon him with intense and poignant bitterness. He could hardly restrain himself from pulling the bell, as he had so often done, and standing, with every nerve on the strain, waiting and listening for the sound of HER footstep down the carpetless stairs and along the passage. A moment more, and surely his lips would be fastened to hers again, and her bright face—

“There ain’t no one there, mister,” volunteered a ragamuffin, shuffling by with a pot of beer almost as big as himself.

Of course, there was no one there. John did not need the wizened child, or the bill announcing that the house was to let, which stared at him from the windows, to tell him that. He knew that he should not find Victorine there; yet none the less he turned away with a sick feeling of disappointment and despair.

“So that is the end of it all,” he groaned; and with bowed head he made his way slowly back into the open street.

But it was not quite the end of it all.

On Christmas morning, while Mrs. Smith was busy in the kitchen over her preparations for a dinner which should at once tempt John’s appetite, and satisfy that of her one guest—who, of course, was none other than Mr. Chadwick—the postman came bearing just such a miscellaneous collection of

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friendly greetings and remembrances as one is apt to look for at that season of goodwill. John carried the little bundle of missives into the parlour, and sat down to glance them through. He laid one after another on the table beside him, with little interest when he did not recognise the handwriting of the address, and even less when he did. After all, they would contain nothing but Christmas cards, for the most part from people he never heard of more than once a year, and, if the truth must be told, cared very little about. Thus, mechanically and apathetically, he came to the last letter of the bundle. Then his heart stood still, and he felt all the blood rush from his face. "Mr. John Smith"—it was from her! He knew the handwriting; and who else would address him from Berlin? With trembling fingers he tore open the envelope, and unfolded the sheet of paper which lay within. At first his eyes were blurred, and the words leaped and danced in hopeless confusion before them; but gradually, as he regained something of his self-control, they fell into their proper shapes and relationships. And this is what he then read:

"I remembered your mother's address, which you mentioned to me one night, and write to you there, in the hope that you will get my letter safely. Oh, John, can you ever forgive me? You understand it all now. You know why, to begin with, they wanted to kill you, thinking you were a spy, as they killed the detective they called Penny Whistle, who nearly discovered their plans. It was I who saved your

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life, then, after they had made me threaten you, not because I cared whether you were murdered or not, but because I showed them that, through what I felt to be your love for me, they could make use of you in a very dangerous plot they were elaborating at the time. And so, we had you come to us, and made you think we liked you, and I pretended to accept you as my lover, while we all laughed at you behind your back. Alexis was the only one who stood out against the plan, and called it a shame, and would have found some way of breaking it up, if it had not been for Patrick, who overruled him by his tremendous influence, and a will-power that literally conquers everything. And then I was punished for what I had done, for I grew to love you, John, as I love you now—more, more, a thousand times more, as I told you once, than I ever thought I could love anybody. And you can guess the rest—my horror, my misery, my despair, when I saw the meshes being woven round and round you, and no way of escape. Oh, John ; I would have told you all, then and there, but for the dreadful vow I had sworn to secrecy, and the fearful fate that would have overwhelmed us both if I had breathed a word ! For myself I would not have cared—but for you ! I did what I could, believe me, John, I did everything I could, and I cannot tell you how cruelly they treated me when they saw that I was turning against them. But if I suffered, I deserved to suffer. It was you, not myself that I was thinking of. If they guess now that I have written to you, they will murder me outright, or torture me to death ! But what do I care ? In the end I beat them. The paper you were to have carried with you to Paris

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contained something that I cannot even now tell you—it is too dreadful!—but which would almost certainly have caused your destruction! The one I gave you instead would have ruined our plot, even if it had not been discovered; but it would have saved you! Oh, John, John! forgive me! I cannot, cannot tell you of my unhappiness! My heart is broken! Forgive me, and forget me, and may God bless you! —V.”

“John! are you ill?” cried Mrs. Smith, entering the room, with a handful of plates and dishes, to find her son with his face buried in his hands.

“Yes—no—mother—not ill! I—I—oh, mother!” And staggering to his feet, he passed her hurriedly, and with the letter clutched convulsively in his hand, reeled upstairs to his own room.

THE END



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